IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AT COLLEGE:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EVANGELICAL K-12 SCHOOL GRADUATES

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Philip N. Taylor

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Abstract

This qualitative research project examines the lived experiences of seven graduates of Evangelical Christian high schools who matriculated in nonsectarian college environments. Through an examination of participants’ conceptualization of their religious identity, this research provides new insights into how students mediate between exclusivist religious beliefs and environments that promote tolerance of diverse views. It also brings new understanding of ways students make meaning from scientific and historic knowledge that contrasts with narratives they were taught in high school. Influences that had the most significant impact on religious identity development included hidden and formal curriculum and peers in participants’ Evangelical Christian high schools. At college, decreased religiosity and interactions with non-Christians and LGBTQ people were important influencers. Church and mission trips also continued to be meaningful in the lives of a few participants. Reconciling the Evangelical faith of adolescence with new understandings of the world produced intrapersonal conflict. All participants grappled with beliefs about social, scientific, and political issues. Most described new ways of thinking that diverged from traditional Evangelical ideas, especially about LGBTQ people. However most held strongly to other stances, such as anti-abortion convictions. The significance of the findings is discussed in the context of literature on meaning making, multiple dimensions of identity, and evangelical school curricula.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Graduates of evangelical Christian K-12 schools who choose to attend public or nonsectarian colleges and universities face a potential collision of competing world views. Evangelicals discuss the collision in terms of a culture war (Schultz, 2003), highlighting their perception of complete opposition of one to the other. Evangelicals perceive “hostility against Christian thought” (Lockerbie, 2005, p. 38) in secular higher education. Many interpret commitments of public universities to be “centers of scholarly inquiry and opponents of repression” (Gutmann, 1987, p. 174) as an attack on their biblical, Christian epistemology. Yet, some students from evangelical secondary schools choose to attend nonsectarian colleges and universities. Presumably, these students find ways to mediate tension between their identities as graduates of evangelical schools and students in a nonsectarian institution.

Research problem. Opposition of evangelical Christians to nonsectarian academia stems from religious convictions on a host of issues. Beliefs about political, social, and scientific issues are deeply connected to religious beliefs and contribute to perceptions of hostility (Colson & Pearcey, 2004). Of course, examining evangelicals as one, monolithic political group is problematic. However, many share beliefs about a wide range of issues based on their interpretation of the Bible as inerrant and infallible (Bindewald, 2015). According to the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2015b), 76% of white evangelicals are opposed to same-sex marriage, 75% identify are morally opposed to abortion (Pew Research Center, 2015a), and 65% believe that humans and other living things are not the product of evolution (Pew Research Center, 2014).
Many evangelicals interpret stances about LGBTQ rights, abortion, evolution, and other issues that contradict traditional evangelical beliefs as attacks against their religion (Blanton, 2015). Around one-third of all Americans believe that university professors have a “liberal bias” (Gross & Simmons, 2006) that would conflict with traditional evangelical stances on social issues. University professors are also more likely to express a higher tolerance for engaging with controversial ideas than the general population (Gross & Fosse, 2012). To evangelicals, tolerance for any idea not approved by their interpretation of Scripture is threatening. It represents a rejection of God and the absolute truth of Jesus (Lockerbie, 2005). The perception that university professors are liberal and tolerant of ideas that evangelicals are not may contribute to apprehension of public higher education. College students who come from evangelical Christian schools may view professors and curricula as antagonistic towards their faith.

Spiritual and religious expression on many college campuses is more vibrant than in previous eras (Hartley, 2004). Even though many college students may be open to spirituality, the form of spirituality is often pluralistic, inclusive, and distrustful of formally organized religion (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001). Pluralist spirituality contrasts sharply with evangelical theology. Evangelicals believe in large numbers that to be an evangelical, one must agree with the tenet of exclusivity—that Jesus Christ is the only way to access God (Lugo, Cooperman, O’Connell, & Stencel, 2011). In general, college students may be more welcoming to spirituality than in the past. Its form is not in alignment with the spirituality prescribed as true by evangelical K-12 schools, however. Evangelical students may see the inclusive spirituality on campus as incongruent with their own belief structures (Moran, Lang, & Oliver, 2007).

College years are commonly a time of searching for meaning and purpose, and many young adults examine their religious beliefs critically (Fowler, 1981). Regardless of religiosity,
critical examination often leads to progressing from a tacitly held, conformist beliefs to more personalized belief structures (Das & Harries, 1996). For evangelical college students in particular, the process may include differentiating personal spiritual identity from those of other traditions, and even other evangelicals with differing theological views (Moran, 2007). The process of making meaning about identity by reconciling evangelical faith of adolescence with new experiences in a less sectarian environment is undoubtedly complex.

**Justification of the research problem.** The responses of evangelical students to tensions between the faith environments of their youth and their nonsectarian higher education environments is far from uniform. Regnerus et al. (2007) performed a longitudinal study that compared religious attitudes between high school and after seven years. The study found that 62.7% of evangelical young adults decreased their participation in religious services, but only 16.8% disaffiliated from religion all together. While evangelicals do reduce religious participation, abandoning faith is far a majority response (Regnerus et al., 2007). Understanding the ways students from religious backgrounds make meaning of their faith is more complex than a categorization by religiosity.

College students who retain their evangelical faith respond to their environment in a multitude of ways. According to Moran (2007), some go through a process of identity authentication that involves differentiating and solidifying their evangelical values. Other students retain many tenets of evangelical faith while adopting more tolerant views. Evangelical students who have lesbian or gay acquaintances have significantly less negative views on LGBT rights than those who do not (Wolff, Himes, Kwon, & Bollinger, 2012). In fact, a near majority of evangelicals under thirty-five approve of same-sex marriage (Hinch, 2014). Young evangelicals participate in premarital sex only slightly less than other young adults (Kain, 2011).
Even though abortion has historically been a rallying issue for evangelicals, over a quarter of evangelicals’ unintended pregnancies ended in abortion in 2008 (Finer & Zolna, 2011).

American universities may seem like the front of the battle line for students from evangelical schools to evangelical Christians who describe a war against an increasingly secular culture. Some young evangelicals retain traditional beliefs and stances while others disaffiliate from religion all together. A large segment of students consolidate aspects of their evangelical faith with views not traditionally acceptable to evangelicals. In each case, students caught in the midst of the conflict presumably make sense of competing expectations from their religious background and secular environment. This research examines the ways the expectations shape identity development for one group.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** By investigating the identity development of one group of Christian school graduates, this study fills a hole in the literature. Various studies have investigated the civic engagement of Christian school graduates (Godwin, Godwin, & Martinez-Ebers, 2004). Ethnographic studies have probed the experience of current students in fundamentalist schools (Peshkin, 1988). This qualitative study offers insights into evangelical Christian schooling from a different vantage. It investigates how graduates of evangelical schools make meaning of their experiences after they have had some time to consider their experiences in new, presumably less evangelical, environments.

**Audience.** University faculty and student support staff, parents considering non-public schooling options, Christian school teachers and administrators, and educational policy makers could benefit from this study. New insights into the students’ development may be helpful in decision making at a variety of levels. Change is needed in evangelical K-12 schools to better support the development of students. While the goals of increased tolerance and inclusivity may
be anathema to some stakeholders, other teachers and administrators may simply be unaware of the potential for harm of using fundamentalist curricula. This results of this project may be beneficial to anyone interested in the experiences of students in schools using fundamentalist curricula.

The problem of practice is significant to multiple audiences: university faculty and student support staff, parents considering non-public schooling options, Christian school teachers and administrators, and educational policy makers. University faculty and staff invest in the development, including the spiritual development, of students (Mayhew, 2012). Students who come from evangelical backgrounds often experience religious struggle (Mayhew, 2012), so faculty and staff should be equipped help these students. Colleges are typically a place where students and faculty confront various forms of privilege. Helping evangelical students who simultaneously benefit from religious privilege and perceive religious discrimination is one complicated dimension of such work (Larson & Shady, 2012).

According to Riley (2006), evangelical school graduates’ experiences have led some university admissions officials to reconsider how they accept credit from evangelical schools. In one notable case the University of California system rejected credit from Christian school history, government, and science classes. In ACSI v. Stearns, a federal court rejected the Association of Christian Schools International’s claim that the University of California discriminated against Christian school students. The ruling approved the university system to deny credit for classes that teach only intelligent design, teach the infallibility of the Bible, and make value judgments of historical figures based on their religion. Secular universities must now consider how the educational backgrounds of students from evangelical schools prepare them for higher education.
The problem is also significant for parents, who may choose private schooling for many reasons, including religion, race, and concerns about the quality of public education available (Wrinkle, Stewart, & Polinard, 1999). Along with parents, educators at religious schools can play a significant role in the forming of religious identity of teenagers (Cohen-Malayev, Schachter, & Rich, 2014). Parents who consider evangelical schools, especially for reasons other than religion, should recognize the potential for personal, internal conflict for their children. Additionally, evangelical Christian schools should deliberate the potential negative effects of presenting only one-sided accounts of theology, science, and history. Boerema (2011) found that even some Christian-school teachers recognize the possibility that a danger of “faith-based schooling is that it can degenerate into indoctrination” (p. 33).

Finally, the problem is significant for policy makers responsible for decisions about voucher programs and accreditation that include evangelical schools. In the United States, Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925) established the right of parents to choose religious education for their children (Devins, 1991). However, compulsory attendance laws give states the authority to oversee accreditation and licensing for private schools (Devins, 1991). Voucher programs direct public funds to pay for education at private, religious schools in some jurisdictions (“School voucher laws: state-by-state comparison,” 2014). In Texas, this researcher’s home state, schools have received charters that use curricula with ties to conservative Christianity (Kopplin, 2014). Issues of oversight and public funding increase the importance for governmental leaders at the local and state levels to understand how evangelical schools shape students’ social, political, and moral outlooks. Along with the significance the problem of practice represents for children in evangelical schools, it is also substantial for universities, parents, Christian schools, and educational policy makers.
Significance of the Research Problem

Even though colleges and university students are more open to religion than they have been in a long time (Hartley, 2004), attending secular universities represents a big transition for students with evangelical backgrounds (Moran et al., 2007). This study focuses specifically on the experiences of students from private, religious schools. About 1.2% of American K-12 students attend schools with evangelical or Fundamentalist Christian affiliations (Broughman & Swaim, 2013). A recent study of private school students (CARDUS, 2014) found that these students are more likely to attend small, especially small Christian, colleges than their public school counterparts. However, many also attend nonsectarian colleges and universities. Students from evangelical schools who choose to attend nonsectarian institutions share a religious background with evangelical peers who attended public secondary school. Any student from an evangelical background may encounter some level of religious struggle (Bowman & Small, 2010). Since just over one-fourth of Americans identify with evangelical Christianity (G. Smith, 2015), the population included in this study may be representative of a larger segment of American college students.

Positionality Statement

Since religious beliefs are integral to this study, my upbringing in a Christian home in the South informs my interest in the research topic. As the son of a lay preacher, church was an integral part of my childhood. I was taught that God would accept only people in our particular sect of evangelical Christianity. Acceptance included salvation from God’s wrath—a literal, eternal, conscious torment in a burning lake of fire. Our denomination included perhaps a couple thousand members, mostly in the Southern United States. I grew up believing that other than these few people, almost everyone went to Hell when they die. Members were expected to
uphold the church’s stances on key doctrinal points. These included, among others, the
exclusivity of our sect, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone, male supremacy, and the
sinfulness of abortion and non-heterosexual relationships. In addition, the church taught that true
believers did not use musical instruments in worship services and had to baptized as adults to be
saved.

All of these doctrines stem from interpreting particular biblical texts literally, a popular
hermeneutic among evangelicals. The church believed that the Bible was direct revelation from
God. Leaders taught that every word was scientifically, theologically, and historically without
error—both inerrant and infallible. The church was strictly positivist towards truth—not only did
truth exist, it was completely knowable through correct interpretation of the Bible. Historic
interpretations by church leaders of unclear passages were given status of virtually equal merit to
the text itself. Most theology curricula used in evangelical schools uphold similar views on the
Bible’s inerrancy and infallibility.

My family lived in a rural town where public schools shared many common
characteristics with evangelical Christian schools. Even in the late 1990s and early 2000s, my
public school teachers talked about faith, occasionally led public prayer, and some even began
class with Bible readings. Science teachers provided disclaimers when they taught about
biological evolution that it was only a theory. Local churches gave books about intelligent design
to students on campus. My high school marching band began all of its performances by reciting
“Our Father” in a large circle on the sidelines. Most students and families had a Christian
background, and the few who did not were relegated to the social margins. I benefited from the
privilege of the Christian majority, even though the church my family attended would not have
accepted many of the people in the majority as true believers.
The exclusivity I learned as a child became problematic through my college years. The change was gradual, and it led to trading commitments between a few different evangelical denominations. I became uncomfortable with the ease fellow Evangelicals reconciled stances on war and capital punishment, the marginalization of women, and the outright exclusion of LGBTQ people with what I read in the Bible. Derrick Bell’s (2003) description of his faith journey during the civil rights movement describes the awe I encountered in the gospels and wanted to find in a faith community: “[W]hat most attracted me to the teachings of Christ was his courage and his vision of radical inclusiveness. The teachings of Jesus were revelatory and revolutionary. Christianity should embrace, not exclude” (p. 79). The journey has been long, but my family and I now belong to a mainline Protestant denomination with others who have embraced this message.

I still attended a conservative evangelical congregation when I began a doctoral program in a nonsectarian university. While I never interpreted coursework or material in my program as opposed being Christianity, I did begin to look at the world differently than I had before. I was asked to examine whiteness (McIntosh, 1998) and how I participated in privilege. It challenged my notion that life worked out for those who worked hard and trusted God enough. A critical lens was messier than believing God simply chose to bless some and not others, but it made a lot more sense. When I read about oppressive pedagogy (Freire, 1970), I could not help making parallels to the “believe it or Hell” tactics used at times in evangelical churches. I also came to realize that a strictly positivist view of the world has serious limitations for explaining parts of human experience.

The ideas I encountered in the doctoral program motivated me to take an honest, and at times critical, look at my beliefs and history. This project is an outcome of my own identity work.
as I attempt to lead a better examined and authentic life. Faith is important to me, but it has changed. The kind of faith that is most meaningful to me is described by an admonition from the prophet Micah to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6.8) rather than oppress. In my role as an educator, to act justly is to confront curricula and pedagogies that allow dangerous patterns of hegemony to persist. To love mercy is to work for educational systems that make the world a better place for everyone. To walk humbly is to do my work with an appreciation for, as one commentator put it, “the world’s grandeur and our proper place within it” (Penzner, 2015, p. 29). Jesus’s call to be radically inclusive, to embrace, and to love brings me to pursue this research. My hope is that might lead to a little more justice, mercy, and humility in the world.

The intersection of my religious background with my role as an educational practitioner and researcher adds complexity to this study. In some ways, I come to it as an insider. I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian home and, until recently, taught at an evangelical Christian school. At previous points in my life, I held evangelical stances on biblical inerrancy and infallibility, the exclusivity of salvation, young Earth creationism, male superiority, and so on. However, I sometimes feel like an outsider in my own context because of my understandings of some theological, scientific, and political issues. The process of constructing my sense of self with regards to religion has been messy, and at times, painful. I come to this research with a personal burden to better understand how students process their own internal religious conflicts.

One way for me to be a change agent is to expose ideas that are contrary to the principles of tolerance, freedom, and justice. The first step for me was to begin asking difficult questions and cease passive support of oppressive dogma through silence. The next steps are to work more actively to bring change. As a practitioner, I will strive for an anti-oppressive classroom. As a
scholar, I will seek projects that confront hegemony and intolerance. I hope that my work will lead to more opportunities to be an agent for good.

The project heightened my awareness of the importance of education that is anti-oppressive. In my local context, I began to think through the possible repercussions of problematic curriculum with colleagues. Some showed receptivity to critical analysis of our curricula. However, the curricula that I present in the literature review as oppressive represents the deeply held religious views of most stakeholders. Questioning official and unofficial stances too strongly would have brought into question my religious orthodoxy to school leaders. The sense of conflict I felt between the school’s positions, which administrators and parents assumed all faculty upheld, and my personal beliefs was strong. I decided I could no longer work for change in the school without compromising authenticity and accepted a new position in a nonsectarian context.

Research Central Question

The central research question of this study is:

- What are the experiences of graduates of evangelical Christian schools attending a nonsectarian college or university constructing the religious dimension of their identity?

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) to examine students’ construction of identity, along with Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) reconceptualization of the model. According to Jones and McEwen (2000), self is the core of identity. Significant social dimensions of identity and contextual influences impact one’s sense of self. Abes et al. (2007) reconceptualized MMDI to include meaning-making (Kegan,
1998) to explain how contextual influences impact how people understand dimensions of their identity differently. This overview of the study’s theoretical framework describes MMDI, constructivist meaning making, and then, the way one’s capability for meaning making affects identity construction.

MMDI. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) MMDI described identity in terms of a personal core surrounded by orbiting social identity dimensions and contextual influences. The social dimensions and contextual influences that influence an individual’s sense of self include gender, race, culture, religion, and class. Jones and McEwen (2000) theorized that at various points of one’s life, each influence may play a larger or smaller role in identity construction. For example, in the study that led to the development of MMDI, Jones and Abes (2004) studied identity in college-aged lesbian women. The researchers theorized that while social dimensions such as “race, culture, gender, family, education, relationships with those different from oneself, and religion” (p. 408) affected the way participants viewed their identity, the factors did not have equal impact on all participants. Participants who identified with other social dimensions typically viewed as lacking privilege had more impact on identity than when those typically associated with privilege.

The theoretical basis for MMDI is grounded in the work of developmental psychology of the 20th century, especially models of socially constructed identities (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000). MMDI was novel in that, instead of centering on one social identity dimension, such as race or gender, it addressed intersecting social identities (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000). Reynolds and Pope (1991) provided one of the first models that explored the intersection of multiple social dimensions of oppression. The model challenged identity models Reynolds and Pope (1991) called “simplistic frameworks” (p. 174) that treated marginalized groups
monolithically, without recognizing the effect of having multiple oppressed identities. Their multidimensional identity (oppressions) model explored the ways in which people who identify with multiple oppressed identities negotiate their identity. The model proposed four possibilities for identity negotiation: (1) to passively accept a socially-assigned aspect of self, such as race or gender; (2) to consciously identify with one aspect of self; (3) to identify with multiple aspects of self, but in a segmented fashion; and (4) to combine multiple aspects of self in an intersected identity (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). MMDI built on the work of Reynolds and Pope (1991) by extending the concept of multiple dimensions of oppression to multiple dimensions of identity.

Jones and McEwen (2000) considered identity as an integration of internal, personal attributes and external social identities. Reid and Deaux (1996) contrasted this view of personal and social identity integration with segregation models. Models of identity segregation propose that individuals separate personal attributes from social identity characteristics in their view of self. Personal attributes include personality traits and behaviors that an individual might use in describing one’s self. Social identity characteristics are those based on relationships to others and group membership. Reid and Deaux (1996), based on a study of college students free recall to test cognitive organization, posited that an integration model better describes identity construction. Rather than separating personal characteristics and social dimensions of identity, Reid and Deaux’s (1996) model suggested individuals use both to form cognitive structures of identity. For example, one identity cluster might include the social identities sister and friend and personal attributes good listener, advice giver, and fun. For the same person, another cluster might include social identities of agnostic and personal attribute skeptical. An integrative model of identity, such as MMDI, views each cluster of identity one constructs as a combination of multiple social dimensions and personal attributes (Reid & Deaux, 1996).
Meaning making in MMDI. Abes et al. (2007), building on the work of Jones and McEwen (2000), reconceptualized MMDI in an effort to better explain identity negotiation. In the revised model, Abes et al. (2007) used capability for meaning-making (Kegan, 1982) to further describe how perceptions of social identities interact with personal attributes to constitute one’s sense of self. Meaning making formed the basis of Kegan’s (1982) constructive development framework. The framework is developmental, in that is described a progression of changes in the way individuals make meaning over their lifespan.

Kegan (1980) described human being as the activity of making meaning, which shapes existence. The way one behaves is “coherent and meaningful when viewed through the perspective of the actor’s constitution of reality” (1980, p. 374). Even though the way everyone makes meaning is unique, Kegan submitted that many parallels exist to the foundational meaning-making structures. Additionally, humans progress through increasingly complex stages of modes of constructing meaning (Kegan, 1980).

Kegan (1998) used object, the content of one’s knowing, and subject, the structure of one’s knowing, to differentiate between developmental stages. Each stage, or order of mind, represents a system of knowing. In the first order, the impulsive mind, one’s reflexes are subject to their impulses and perceptions. In the second order, the instrumental mind, impulses and perceptions are subject to needs, interests, and desires. In the third order, the socialized mind, one’s needs, interests, and desires are subject to interpersonal relationships and mutuality. In the fourth order, the self-authoring mind, interpersonal relationships and mutuality are subject to self-authorship, identity, and ideology. In the fifth order, the self-transforming mind, self-authorship, identity, and ideology are subject to the dialectic between ideologies. In each
sequential transition, one becomes able to know about the structures of making meaning to which were previously subject.

According to Kegan (1998), almost 60% of adults’ meaning making capabilities can be represented by the socialized mind, which develops post-adolescence. The fourth order, the self-authoring mind, is not always achieved. 35% or so reach the stage at various points in adulthood. Few people reach the fifth order of a self-transforming mind, and almost none do before age forty. (Baxter Magolda, 2004a) suggested most traditional-aged college students operate with third order meaning making systems, with some transitioning and beginning to use fourth order systems. In her work, Baxter Magolda characterized third order of mind as functional meaning making and the fourth as foundational meaning making.

For individuals operating with functional meaning making systems, relationships define identity. Foundational thinking brings new capacity for self-authorship, to negotiate identity conflict when relational conflict arises (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Individuals with capability for foundational meaning making are able to reflect relationships as object, whereas those with functional meaning making capability are subject to relationships. As emerging adults transition from functional to foundational forms of making meaning, they are better able to resolve conflicts between competing internal and external influences (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Abes et al. (2007) incorporated meaning-making in a new, reconceptualization of MMDI. The new iteration of the model links cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains. It attempts to holistically explain what relationships individuals form between personal and social identities and how those relationships are constructed. In the model, meaning making serves as a filter that may allow or disallow social identities from impacting how one views identity. Abes and Kasch (2007) applied the reconceptualized MMDI model in a study of college-aged lesbian
women. External and contextual influences had a great influence on identity on participants with a functional meaning-making filter. Participants with meaning-making filters in transition from functional to foundational experienced significant identity tension. They used old, formulaic ways of using stereotypes to understand their identity, even as they were becoming aware that of the shortcomings of stereotypes. Participants with a foundational meaning-making filter were able to reinterpret contextual influences and give new meaning to the way they identified with social identities.

MMDI (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000) forms the foundation for this study’s theoretical framework. Abes et al.’s (Abes et al., 2007) reconceptualization of MMDI integrates meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 2009) as a filter through which social influences are process in personal identity construction. The model will be especially useful for examining how graduates from evangelical Christian schools attending nonsectarian colleges and universities construct identity from multiple social dimensions.

**Organization**

This research study is organized into five chapters: (1) introduction, (2) literature review, (3) research design, (4) findings, and (5) discussion. Chapter one introduced the study and described the model of multiple dimensions of identity, the theoretical framework on which it is built. Chapter two contains a review of the literature on evangelical Christian schooling and identity development. Chapter three describes interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), which formed the methodological grounding of the study. Chapter four details the themes that emerged in the research, and chapter five discusses the findings and their implications.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Students who graduate from evangelical Christian secondary schools presumably encounter radically different environments when they arrive at nonsectarian colleges and universities. Yet, many evangelicals, including graduates of conservative Christian high schools, choose to attend institutions without religious affiliations. This study explores how students construct and understand their identities. The literature review first examines distinctive characteristics of evangelical belief that may lead to internal conflict. Then, it reviews the evangelical school movement and issues with curricula used in its schools. Finally, it surveys the literature on religiosity trends of emerging adults.

Protestant Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism

The participants of this study are graduates of schools with connections to the Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist Christian movements in America. While many differences exist in various groups, common history and beliefs may influence many aspects participants’ experiences. By briefly exploring the roots and beliefs of evangelicalism and fundamentalism, this section of the literature review establishes context for the environments from which study participants come.

Christianity’s history in America pre-dates the American Revolution, and many different groups and denominations exist today (Noll, 2012). English, other Western European, and Scandinavian non-conformists spread Protestantism during the American colonial period (J. S. Jones, 2010). Since there was no official state church and much of the population were non-conformists, there was an environment of “constantly changing, experimental and fluid variety of Protestantism” (J. S. Jones, 2010, p. 32). The result was religious experimentation where traditions and styles were blended (Noll, 2012). Even so, the belief that Protestants were the
“true” Christians that upheld correct beliefs and living standards was common (J. S. Jones, 2010). Protestants’ views on orthodoxy and orthopraxy made way for modern evangelical Christianity (J. S. Jones, 2010).

The Association of Christian Schools International, or ACSI, is an evangelical school organization that represents the schools of all participants in this study. Their Statement of Faith (Association of Christian Schools International, 2015) includes distinguishing beliefs of evangelical faith: (1) the inspiration of the Bible and its infallibility and inerrancy, (2) a Trinitarian God—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, (3) the deity of Christ, (4) the depravity of humanity, and by extension the necessity of salvation, (5) that the “saved” will spend eternity in Heaven while the “lost” will be condemned, (6) a spiritual unity of believers and Christ, and (7) that the Holy Spirit enables Christians to live a holy life. With little fanfare in late 2015, two additional points were added: (8) established marriage as between one man and one woman and condemned all extra-marital sexual relationships and (9) confirmed belief in a male/female gender binary that conforms to biological sex. Evangelicals prioritize proselytization of non-believers or non-evangelicals to join their faith (Green, 2004). Evangelicals often describe converting to evangelical Christianity in terms of becoming ‘born again’ (J. S. Jones, 2010).

One quarter of Americans identify as evangelical Christians (G. Smith, 2015). Fundamentalism is one sub-movement in evangelicalism. Marsden (1991) differentiates evangelicals and fundamentalists not by beliefs, but by the “militancy” (p. 1) with which the beliefs are held. Fundamentalists “tend toward intolerance” (Green, 2004). They hold oppositional worldviews, distinguishing themselves from other Christians based on theology and beliefs about social issues (J. S. Jones, 2010). Fundamentalist Christians have closely associated
with political movements (Marsden, 1991). The movement champions small government, ending welfare programs, ending legal abortion, deregulating markets, and other conservative ideals, often elevating political beliefs to matters of religious orthodoxy (Paterson, 2000). In this study, “fundamentalist” is used to describe curricula that promote such religious and political beliefs. Publishers who profess fundamentalist theological and conservative political views supply curricula used in many evangelical schools (Paterson, 2003).

**Evangelical Christian Education**

The history of private Christian schooling in the United States is composed of two distinct movements: Catholic schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and a surge of Protestant schools in the mid 1960s (Lines, 1986). In the mid-eighteen hundreds, Horace Mann brought a vision of the common school to America whereby all children could learn together in order to dismantle social and class differences (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001). Mann’s vision for public schools was one where students could attend tuition-free institutions that were not under sectarian control (Horton, 2002). This, Mann thought, would lead to a real democratic society where the people as a whole could rule, rather than only society’s elite (Horton, 2002). Even though Mann used language of nonsectarianism, he held anti-Catholic views and public schools included many elements of Protestant Christianity (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001). Common schools gradually replaced the church schools with a “generic pan-Protestantism” (Paterson, 2003, p. 7). While practices from other religions were theoretically permitted, the Bible was included in the schools’ curriculum. Parents of children who did want a Protestant education for their children often objected to Mann’s common schools (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001).

As compulsory education laws became popular in the nineteenth century, the public schools available for students were still heavily biased towards Protestantism. Catholics who
opposed the anti-Catholic stances in curricula founded a system of private schools (Lines, 1986). According to Patterson (Paterson, 2003), public education shifted towards a more inclusive secularism from its Protestant roots in the mid-twentieth century. Some Christians interpreted the shift as an attack on Protestant Christianity and began founding Christian schools. A second surge in founding and attendance of Christian schools happened in the 1980s as the religious right movement became popular among evangelical Protestants.

**Race.** While families have chosen private Christian schools for strictly religious reasons (Lines, 1986), race has also driven increased enrollments (Baum-Snow & Lutz, 2011). Until 1982 private schools that discriminated based on race were allowed to claim federal tax exemptions, when the Supreme Court ruled against Bob Jones University (“Timeline,” n.d.). The University’s publishing arm, BJU Press, now supplies curriculum to many evangelical Christian schools. As late as the 1990s, Wrinkle et al. (1999) found that desire for racially segregated schools was a leading reason parents of children in Texas chose to send children to private, most often Protestant Christian, schools. Saporito (2009) found that the enrollment of White families in private schools is “strongly and positively correlated with the percentage of children in their communities who are Black—even after holding constant a series of individual and community-level factors that may account for this trend” (p. 172). Evangelical literature and school leaders are unlikely to use overtly racist language, hiring policies, or admissions practices, now. However, the correlation has remained constant throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s (Saporito, 2009).

**Philosophy of the evangelical school movement.** The reasons families choose evangelical schooling, or that the schools are founded in the first place, are undoubtedly complex. This adds to the difficulty of profiling one overarching philosophy of evangelical
schools. Three common themes theorists in the movement frequently highlight are educating children for living lives conformed to God’s standards, universal truth, and a culture war between Christians and non-Christians. With a focus on thinking in accordance with correct doctrine, the main objective of evangelical schooling becomes for students to fit a proper mold. Greene (2003) declared, “The true purpose of Christian education is to prepare young people for a complete life under the lordship of Jesus Christ” (p. 259). Thinkers of the movement discuss living a life under the lordship in terms of a biblical worldview, or looking at the world in a proper way (Braley, Layman, & White, 2003). Education’s primary purpose is to help students conform to religious standards for belief and living.

Truth for the fundamentalist Christian is positivist. In positivism, reality is absolute and knowable (Alexander, 2006). Rather than being based on scientific principle, truth is founded on the character of the Christian God (Lockerbie, 2005). According to Braley et al. (2003), “All of life, including education, is based on beliefs about the world… All things, including scientific laws, depend on the creator-sustainer God, and we cannot understand anything fully without a faith commitment to Him” (p. 72-73). Even though all truth is knowable, people are dependent on the Holy Spirit to guide towards truth (Lockerbie, 2005). To the fundamentalist Christian, truth is absolute and knowable, but only fully accessible to Christians. This view of epistemology discredits non-Christians, which is particularly evident in the way fundamentalists attack knowledge that contradicts their understanding of the Bible.

The us-them dichotomy is especially evident in the language of the culture war in which fundamentalist Christian schools are engaged. Speaking of the culture war, Schultz (Schultz, 2014) echoed a sentiment common in fundamentalist schools: “[W]e now live in an anti-Judeo Christian culture where society opposes and attacks the reality of God and the truth of His Word
at every point of battle” (para. 9). The cultures with which fundamentalist Christians are at war are abundant and sometimes nebulous. They include cultures of non-faith and non-Christian faith (Trent, 2012), big government (Gillespie, 2010), and women’s and LGBTQ rights (Hunter, 2009).

Gutmann (1987), examining education in democracy, said, “Toleration makes peace possible, a precondition for all other democratic accomplishments” (as cited in Paterson, 2003, pg. 162). Fundamentalist Christian education philosophy implies that only Christians can fully access truth; non-Christians are deluded since they do not have the same access to God’s salvation; and Christians are at war with those who oppose theological, social, and political doctrines. The philosophy of evangelical education, with its language of war, battle, and opposition, is patently intolerant.

Curriculum. While many factors undoubtedly influenced the identity development of participants, one that is shared is exposure to fundamentalist Christian curriculum. Much diversity of belief between various groups exists among evangelicals (Bindewald, 2015), but the curricula used by evangelical K-12 schools traditionally share a set of common theological doctrines that this literature review explores. Often, evangelical Christians agree on political beliefs that can also be found in the curricula used in evangelical schools. The political agenda favors legislation that conforms to conservative Christian morality and small government with few or no state-sponsored welfare programs. Capital punishment (Paterson, 2003), suspicion of state sponsored education, and restrictions on abortion and LGBTQ rights are also commonly supported conservative causes (Paterson, 2000).

Bob Jones University Press and A Beka Book Press are two publishers popular in the evangelical schools (Paterson, 2000) movement, including the schools represented by
participants in this study. Both publishers have strong ties to fundamentalist Christian colleges in Florida—Bob Jones University and Pensacola Christian College, respectively (Laats, 2010). Some textbooks from these publishers disregard knowledge generally accepted as factual in favor of teachings entrenched with dogma and propaganda (Laats, 2010). Almost all disciplines are affected, including history, science, economics, theology, and foreign languages.

In an extensive survey of curricula published for Christian schools, Paterson (2003) found that much of the content in fundamentalist curricula is similar to content found in public school curricula. Readers, even outside of evangelical Christianity, would be unlikely to find it objectionable. However, Paterson (2003) also discovered the following common distinctive characteristics of large portions of curricula spanning many disciplines:

- Absence of gender-inclusive language.
- Explicitly didactic passages in both elementary and secondary textbooks.
- Integration of religious and nonreligious material.
- Juxtaposition of persuasive and factual material.
- Frequent use of identifying descriptors for people, groups, and movements, often implying that some are acceptable and some are not.
- Inclusion and exclusion or noticeably disparate amounts of coverage of individuals and groups, with favorable treatment of some and neutral or explicitly negative treatment of others. (p. 14)

This section reviews some specific issues with secondary curricula by fundamentalist publishers that are popular in many evangelical Christian schools, organized by content area.

**History.** Curricula from BJU Press and A Beka Book Press present historical narratives that are in deep conflict with traditionally accepted understandings. In a survey of fundamentalist
history curricula, Paterson (2000) identified some prevalent characteristics. As one might expect, most ancient history texts begin by presenting the Judeo-Christian creation narrative as historically literal. Other accounts are more surprising, however. According to Paterson (2000) texts from Bob Jones University Press and A Beka Book Press include many discriminatory interpretations of history, including:

- The failure of the French and Spanish to successfully colonize North America was part of God’s plan that the United States should be established as a ‘Christian’—i.e., Protestant—nation; the lack of economic progress in Africa and India is a result of pagan belief systems; [and] German Biblical higher criticism and believing Darwinian evolution were the direct causes of World War II,… (p. 151).

Roman Catholicism is often called ‘Romanism’ to distinguish the religion from evangelicalism, and Native Americans are called ‘Pagans’. One A Beka history book goes so far as to say “God used the Trail of Tears to bring many Indians to Christ” (Pan, 2012). Authors and leaders whom texts identified as conservative are portrayed in a positive light, while those identified as liberal are portrayed critically or excluded all together (Paterson, 2000).

Historical revisionism in American history curricula is also alarming. The film *Monumental: In Search of America’s National Treasure* (Barnhart, 2012), is used as a supplement an American History class in this researcher’s school. The film tells the story of the Pilgrims who came to America in search of religious freedom, but fails to show how oppressive of others’ religious freedom they were once they arrived (Conn, 2012). David Barton is featured in the film. According to Barton, America’s founding fathers envisioned a Christian nation guided by God’s law. He misleads viewers by declaring that the Continental Congress used tax dollars to print bibles for use in schools, among other false claims (Rodda, 2006). *Monumental*
shares themes with much of the fundamentalist history curriculum used in some conservative Christian schools—America is a Christian nation and all of its problems are because of theological and moral liberalism. America, as portrayed by the film, was founded as a theocracy and is being ruined by secular, non-Protestants.

**Science.** Intelligent design, another body of curriculum used in evangelical Christian schools that contradicts widely accepted academic understanding. Johnson (2006) described it as the belief that all of life’s complexity can be attributed to supernatural intervention in the natural world, especially without biological evolution. For most advocates of intelligent design, “supernatural intervention” is a thinly veiled reference to the Judeo-Christian deity. It is not surprising that the theory might be taught in Christian schools, even though it dismisses much of the scientific knowledge discovered in the last two centuries.

Intelligent design has serious implications in many scientific disciplines. Science curriculum often used in private Protestant Christian schools, developed by Bob Jones University Press and A Beka Book Press describe the origins of the universe as a six-day process that happened less than ten thousand years ago (Paterson, 2000). In their narratives, textbooks portray creationism as widely accepted scientific fact, and unanswered questions about evolutionary theory are blown out of proportion (Paterson, 2000). Paterson (2000) warned, “use of these materials may precondition students to accept opinions as fact” (p. 154). Some scientific knowledge, especially in the fields of biology, geology, and astronomy, is taught to be at best erroneous and at worst, intentionally misleading propaganda.

Globally, most scientists and world governments agree that Earth’s climate is changing and that humans have the ability to slow the process, or at the very least, mitigate damages (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). The editor-in-chief of Science magazine declared
“anticipating the future under the influence of climate change is one of the most important challenges of our time” (McNutt, 2013, p. 435). Little room for arguing the merits of climate change exists because “the scientific consensus is that these changes [rising average global temperatures and sea levels], and many others, are largely consequences of anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases” (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014, p. 1). Even though the effects of climate change have been established by the worldwide scientific community, science curriculum from Bob Jones University Press states that “God has provided certain ‘checks and balances’ in creation to prevent many of the global upsets that have been predicted by environmentalists” (Wilson, 2012).

A general distrust of science, the theory of divine checks and balances, and the theological belief that humankind is to have dominion over the earth lead to a laissez-faire approach to climate change in some conservative Christian schools. Students are given little reason to consider the effects of indiscriminate resource use on the Earth. The underlying message in fundamentalist science curricula is that Earth can take care of itself, so there is little reason to consider the long-term public good in environmental decisions.

**Economics.** Economics textbooks also commonly contain disconcerting features. One text published by Bob Jones University Press (BJU Press, 2009) claimed that God ordains free-market capitalism because it rewards hard work and punishes those who do not work hard. The same text attributed economic prosperity of America, especially Christians in America, to God’s blessing. In a civics textbook in the same series, unemployment is attributed to personal weakness and too much interference of the government (Paterson, 2003). The fear of unemployment was considered a “good incentive for workers to be diligent in their labors. When there is the possibility of being fired, … a worker is less likely to shirk his responsibilities and
more apt to be efficient in his services” (as cited in Paterson, 2003). The American economic system is commonly presented as a meritocracy. According to Leonardo (2002), describing success in terms of hard work or exceptionalism is a tool people with privilege use to avoid a more thorough historical understanding of how they came to power. Teaching this economic doctrine to high school students gives them the ability to take a “moral high ground” of sorts by failing to recognize their own privilege and the advantage in which they participate.

Paterson (2003) described how many fundamentalist Christian textbooks are opposed to most taxes, socialism, communism, or any programs appear to redistribute wealth. A civics text from BJU lauded the Reagan presidency because lower taxes contributed to a company being able to build new offices and factories, which created good new jobs. An A Beka American History textbook blamed the Clinton administration’s tax increases on increased dependence on government funded social programs. A BJU history book’s teacher’s guide made theological justification for not taxing income with a reference to Jesus’s parable of the talents. It stated, “Each servant was given different amounts of money no attempt was made to redistribute the wealth and equalize the servants’ holdings” (as cited in Paterson, 2003, p. 50). Graduated income taxes are described as a penalty on the hardest working and most disciplined members of society. Since economic policy connected to theology, students may associate free-market capitalism with orthodoxy.

**Foreign Language.** Even fundamentalist Christian foreign language textbooks contain objectionable content. Bob Jones University Press’s secondary Spanish text (Layman, Luna, & Rosier, 2012) contains covert racist elements. In some dialogues, characters with common Latina/o names were portrayed as lazy and unintelligent. When careers were referenced, the characters were often mechanics, construction workers, or plumbers. Characters with names
more generally associated with whites in the U.S. were shown as smart, helpful, and most often in a leadership or authoritative role. Common careers for white characters were doctors, lawyers, and engineers. In one cartoon accompanying a practice dialogue, a mariachi band and Latino waiter serve an affluently dressed white family eating in a restaurant. While examples of overt racism are not abundant, the racial perspectives of BJU Press and A Beka Book Press curricula earned them unsolicited endorsements from various white supremacist groups for homeschooling (Scaramanga, 2014).

**Theology.** The theology presented to students in evangelical schools may add to the complexity of navigating religious identity for graduates. Doctrines of original sin, the sinfulness of LGBTQ people, and dispensationalism are just a few positions that may be problematic. They may influence how students in Evangelical schools see themselves and others.

**Original Sin.** The doctrine of original sin is central to evangelical theology (Paterson, 2003). The doctrine asserts that Adam and Eve fell short of the standard required by God when they chose to eat a piece of fruit that had been forbidden (Bingaman, 2012). Many evangelical Christians insist that this narrative is literal, and happened in the last 10,000 years (Lockerbie, 2005). The original sin had profound impacts for the first people, as well as for humanity of all time. God held Adam and Eve responsible for their rebellion, as well as all subsequent humans (Graham, 2003). The central theme of the narrative of Christianity is that through the death of Christ, God redeems humans from pervasive personal sin, as well as culpability inherited from Adam. Evangelicals believe that redemption is given freely to people who make a personal decision to commit their life to God, and denied to people who do not (Peshkin, 1988).

The doctrine of original sin compels teachers in evangelical Christian schools to proselytize students, since all unsaved, or non-Christian, people are viewed as naturally sinful
People who believe in the “wrong” religion, or in no religion, will spend an eternity of conscious torment (Aten, Mangis, & Campbell, 2010). The message of salvation, and similarly damnation, is intertwined across many disciplines and generally accepted as part of the purpose of Christian education (Bartlett, 2007). Thus, a central theme of an evangelical education from kindergarten through high school is that the world is split into two groups—those who believe and those who do not (Reese, 1985). According to (Kumashiro, 2000), education in which teachers’ assumptions about the other result in bias or mistreatment is oppressive. Using this definition, the theology of evangelical Christian education could be seen as oppressive. It teaches prejudice against non-Christians and professing Christians who do not maintain orthodox views on politics, science, or theology.

Inerrancy and Infallibility. Most evangelicals teach that the Bible should be read and applied literally consider same-sex attraction to be sinful, i.e. morally reprehensible. Slick (n.d.) expressed a view common in fundamentalist circles: “Unlike other sins, homosexuality has a heavy judgment administered by God Himself upon those who commit it— and support it” (para. 3). This view leads some schools to actively discriminate against LGBTQ students and heterosexual students with LGBTQ parents for admission and retention purposes (Morris, 2013). Fundamentalist Christian churches teach that LGBTQ rights are not civil rights since they teach that same-sex relationships are abominable (Barton, 2012). Even worse, fundamentalist Christians sometimes claim, even in court, they have been discriminated against and attacked by a liberal conspiracy with an equality agenda (Sinclair, 2014). The implication is that equality is not desirable. Claims of reverse discrimination teach elitism and imply a right to discriminate for the majority (Leonardo, 2002).
End times. Both BJU Press and A Beka Book Press Bible curricula uphold a dispensational view of eschatology, or the end times. While there are many differences among groups of dispensationalists, they generally maintain that God has interacted with humanity in distinct stages, or dispensations, over time (Sweetnam, 2010). Adherents believe that the world is quickly nearing its end, and that the return of Jesus is imminent (Reed, 2012). Books from the publishers teach premillennialism—that Jesus will return after conditions on Earth progressively deteriorate, there will be a rapture of Christians, and great tribulation on Earth will follow (Knowles, 2014). After the tribulation, in a second stage of Jesus’s return, he will come back with the raptured and regain rule from an anti-Christ in an apocalyptic battle that lasts for a millennium. He will bless a Jewish remnant and those who become Christians after the rapture during this time (Sweetnam, 2010).

Learning premillennial dispensational theology has serious implications for students. In science, it reduces the need to minimize anthropogenic harm to Earth. Deteriorating conditions are to be expected as the second-coming approaches, and Jesus will eventually restore Earth (Curry, 2008). Since the return of Christ is imminent, more importance may be placed on converting non-believers than on social justice. One pastor summarized, “the church should be using her resources to further her one mission in the world, and that mission is reaching the lost with the gospel… the church is never commanded to show compassion to the poor as a means for expanding the kingdom” (J. Johnson, 2011). It may also lead to reduced toleration for world religions, especially Islam. According to Robertson (2014), there was an “intensification of anti-Islamic sentiment and a conviction among an overwhelming majority of dispensationalists that Islam is the personification of the forces that will assault Israel at the Apocalypse” (p. 112) after the attacks of September 11th, 2001 in the United States.
Of course, understanding the experiences of students in evangelical Christian schools is more complex than simply reviewing the ideas they encounter. Even so, the background provides critical context for understanding their experiences. While large portions of curricula seem unprejudiced by dogma, others exhibit considerable bias—so much so that Paterson (2003) concluded, “prolonged exposure to a curriculum dominated by books that foster resentment toward government and strong and unequivocal condemnation of people with different political, social, and religious beliefs may well have a deeply corrosive effect” (p. 184). Coursework in nonsectarian institutions will undoubtedly diverge from some beliefs students encounter in secondary evangelical programs, which may contribute to the ways they construct their identities.

**Inside Christian Schools.** Research inside fundamentalist Christian schools offer perspective as to what the experience is actually like for some students. Most qualitative studies have been conducted by researchers who considered themselves to be outsiders of the movement (Peshkin, 1988). Many quantitative studies completed by religious, although not necessarily fundamentalist Christian, researchers in an attempt to endorse private and religious education (Hill & den Dulk, 2013; Willems, Denessen, Hermans, & Vermeer, 2010).

Peshkin (1988) spent eighteen months inside Bethany Baptist Academy (BBA), a pseudonym for a Midwestern Christian school, in the 1980s. While the research is almost thirty years old now, the non-Christian’s account is one of the most thorough qualitative studies of teenagers’ responses to fundamentalist doctrine. He found no single stereotype of a student at the school—each student’s experience was unique. While a few students accepted the school’s positions without hesitation, most admitted they questioned them at times. The study found that
BBA’s teachers presented a united front against sinful behavior, evolution, abortion, and other social and political matters.

Peshkin’s (1988) ethnography described how the doctrine of divine retribution against unbelievers was presented to children. Students were taught that those who have not believed Christian doctrine when they die will be condemned to an eternal, conscious tormenting. Teachers presented consideration of non-conforming ideas about biological evolution, equal marriage rights, a woman’s reproductive rights, and a whole host of other issues as first steps in spiritual rebellion. Teachers portrayed those who openly disagreed with established norms on one or more of these doctrines as apostate, deluded, and dangerous.

Sexist curricula and attitudes permeate some evangelical Christian schools (Peshkin, 1988). According to Peshkin (1988), these attitudes are rooted theologically in the Christian creation narrative, where man was created first and given divine leadership authority. In the story, Eve ate an apple that God commanded her and Adam not to eat. Female students at BBA discussed Eve’s sin as justification for excluding girls from student body leadership positions. While such overt sexism may not be so prevalent in the schools of this study’s participants, sexist elements are still present in some of the fundamentalist textbooks they use. Stitzlein’s (2008) meta-analysis of studies in fundamentalist Christian schools identified common sexist themes in curricula and lectures. They consistently emphasized God’s maleness; prescribed a subservient, submissive role for women; and discussed women as men’s property. The findings were so stark Stitzlein (2008) claimed sexist dogma was causing harm to girls and “the state has the obligation and legal ability to intervene in this private domain” (p. 45).

Educational researchers’ intent on supporting religious and private education have conducted large quantitative studies of children at non-public schools. Hill & den Dulk (2013)
found that student educated in Protestant Christian schools were much more likely to continue volunteering in adulthood than peers from public, Catholic, and non-Christian private schools. LeBlanc and Slaughter’s (2012) investigation of students at a Christian university in the South reported that students from Protestant Christian schools felt better prepared for the academic rigor of college that graduates of public schools. However, an analysis of multiple broad quantitative studies by Van Pelt et al. (2012) suggested that students in Catholic and non-religious private institutions had better educational attainment and achievement than peers who graduated from Protestant Christian schools. Sikkink (2012) used quantitative data from the CARDUS Education Study to analyze differences in mission of Protestant, Catholic, and non-religious private schools. Protestant schools’ missions tended to highlight relational and religious goals, whereas Catholic and non-religious private schools tended to prioritize academic goals. The finding is in line with studies that have documented strong emphases on religious and political views in curricula in evangelical Christian schools.

**Emerging Adults and Religiosity**

The mission, culture, and curricula of evangelical Christian schools promote beliefs that contrast with ideals normally upheld in nonsectarian colleges and universities. Unsurprisingly, some Christian writers and educational theorists are distrustful of such schools. One evangelical who has written about Christian worldview and culture described difficulty he perceived for families:

Christian families choose to send their son or daughter to a secular or state university, encouraging them to get involved in church and campus ministry programs that may be available. Unfortunately, the vast majority of students are unprepared for the faith challenges that occur in the classroom and in the dorm room. (Brown, 2011, p. 17)
For evangelicals, a significant fear seems to exist that university life and coursework will threaten emerging adults’ faith.

One question that is pervasive in the literature on emerging adults and religion is how their religious practice and beliefs change. The phenomenon is not just an issue for evangelicals—across almost all religions, religious participation declines during early adulthood (Hartley, 2004). Regnerus, Uecker, and Vaaler, (2007) performed a longitudinal study that followed a cross section of high school students through age 25 or so. They found that young adults who do not attend college at all exhibited the most defined patterns of reduced religiosity. Students who completed a four-year degree had the smallest declines in religious service attendance and overall importance of religion (Regnerus et al., 2007). Evangelicals are actually more likely to increase religious engagement than students from religious minorities (Small & Bowman, 2012).

Not only does attending college correlate with smaller declines in religious participation, many young adults attending college are quite open to certain forms of spirituality. In their study of students’ spirituality in four US universities, Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield (2001) concluded:

It is possible that young people in American culture have never been more enthusiastically engaged in religion practice or with religious ideas… [O]ur study reveals that the ethos of decentered, diverse, religiously tolerant institutions of higher education is a breeding ground for vital religious practice and teaching. (Cherry et al., 2001, pp. 294–295)

Even if American universities are not aggressively opposed towards faith, some evangelicals view tolerance and ecumenicalism as opposed to the exclusivity found in their own theology.
According to Carson (Carson, 2013), “contemporary tolerance is intrinsically intolerant” (p. 2) because it does not tolerate Christian claims of absolute moral truth. Tolerant, ecumenical spirituality is not an acceptable faith outcome for most evangelicals concerned with spiritual development of emerging adults.

Evangelical students who maintain strong religious identities have demonstrated evidence of a struggle with “social status ambiguity” (Moran et al., 2007, p. 23). On one hand, Christians receive significant privilege in the United States (Schlosser, 2003). Having participated in that significant privilege, students from evangelical schools may have little experience outside of a dominant religious majority. Protestant students have even been shown to have higher university satisfaction rates than non-religious students and students from religious minorities (Bowman & Toms Smedley, 2013). In a study by Moran et al. (2007), evangelical students reported feeling that many on campus viewed them as privileged because of their religion. At the same time, some participants also felt oppressed because of their faith. One participant summarized perceptions of the marginalization of Christianity:

You can have a class where other religious identities are talked about. People talk about Eastern religions or even tribal religions. And they are talked about with respect. But Christianity is made fun of. I would say that it’s kind of the popular thing to be antagonistic towards Christianity in class. (Moran et al., 2007, p. 30)

Navigating privilege and perceptions of marginalization is one facet of the personal conflict some students from evangelical Christian schools may face.

To help university students navigate faith, many Christian campus organizations have been formed to provide spiritual support. In a study of religious life at a large public university, Cherry (2001) observed that organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ and Intervarsity
Fellowship offered frequent occasions for Christian students to meet with other evangelicals. Meetings contained some elements similar to traditional church services along with opportunities for social interactions. For students who wanted to maintain strong ties to their faith background, evangelical campus organizations fostered interactions with similarly minded students. Strong contextual influences can have a tremendous impact on identity development (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000). Students’ participation with evangelical campus organizations may have an impact on the way they negotiate their religious identities.

Contradictory expectations of the ideals upheld by nonsectarian universities and students’ religious backgrounds may lead to a variety of responses from evangelical college students. Moran et al. (2007) found that some evangelical students hid their religious identity when they perceived antagonism from professors and peers. Other students sought opportunities to be with others who shared their faith in Christian campus ministries. In addition, the changes in religiosity and acceptance of tolerant outlooks vary greatly among individual students. Evangelical students who have lesbian or gay acquaintances were more likely to develop accepting attitudes towards LGBTQ people than their peers who do not (Wolff et al., 2012). Evangelical students who engaged in non-marital sex or drug and alcohol use saw more declines in religious participation and attitudes than those who did not, especially those who married while still in college (Small & Bowman, 2012).

Conclusion

Evangelical K-12 schools provide the backdrop for this study. All of the participants attended these schools and have experience with their theology. In some ways, curricula from fundamentalist publishers used by evangelical schools are not so different from those used in other schools. However, fundamentalist curricula diverge sharply in their intolerance of non-
evangelical religions and treatment of various aspects of history, science, and economics. Since all material is presented to students as God’s absolute truth, questioning conservative political and theological stances can be seen as a first step to spiritual rebellion. College years are a time when many emerging adults explore spirituality and exhibit declines in religious participation. For students with evangelical backgrounds, confrontation of Christian hegemony, exclusivism, and other beliefs may lead to personal struggle. Individual responses vary greatly, from abandoning faith altogether to becoming even more committed to evangelical doctrines.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Methodology

This qualitative study explored the experiences of graduates of K-12 evangelical Christian schools who attend nonsectarian colleges constructing aspects of religious identity. The study’s central research question is: What are the experiences of graduates of evangelical Christian schools attending a nonsectarian college or university constructing the religious dimension of their identity?

Through an examination of participants’ conceptualization of their religious identity, this research provides new insights into how undergraduates with religious childhood experiences mediate between exclusivist religious beliefs and environments that promote tolerance of diverse views. The research attempted to bring new understanding of how students make meaning from scientific and historic knowledge in stark contrast to narratives they were taught in high school. This chapter describes the research methodology and design the study used; the participants; recruitment and access; measures established for participants’ protection; data collection, storage, and analysis; and the trustworthiness of the study.

Research Design

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a methodology for doing qualitative research that was established in the late 1990s. The method was first used in psychological research (J. A. Smith, 2004), but IPA has now been used in many other fields including clinical and counseling psychology and educational psychology (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The method has shared phenomenological and interpretative, or hermeneutic, goals of describing and making sense of experience (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton,
IPA research is idiographic, in that it describes and interprets the first-person, subjective experience of individual participants (J. A. Smith, 2011).

**Research Tradition**

IPA draws from its philosophical roots in phenomenology (J. A. Smith, 2011). Phenomenology describes a branch of philosophy developed by Husserl, Heidegger, Spiegelberg, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoer (Paley, 1997). Phenomenology also describes methodology used in psychological research based on the philosophical foundation (Dukes, 1984). Since phenomenology is a branch of philosophy with a long tradition and has been influenced by methodologists’ interpretations, its main ideas have morphed significantly over time (Racher & Robinson, 2003). At its simplest, however, phenomenology assumes that human experience makes sense, without interpretation, to those who experience it (Dukes, 1984). The goal of phenomenological research is to see and describe features of an experience that are intrinsic to the experience (Dowling, 2007).

Situating phenomenological and IPA research into traditional paradigms is not simple. Phenomenology, especially as expressed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, takes a post-positivist approach to understanding reality (Dowling, 2007). More recent phenomenologists and IPA researchers assert a constructivist or interpretivist research paradigm (Rolfe, 2006). Nuanced research objectives evidence different positions in this paradigm spectrum. According to Dowling (2007), IPA and “new phenomenology” (p. 137) usually describes and interprets the meaning participants make from their experiences. Even though IPA seems subjective, Rolfe (2006) noted that researchers assume there exist “essential truths about reality to which the subject of the research has direct access” (p. 307), which reflects positivist assumptions. Racher
and Robinson (2003) suggested considering phenomenological research on a paradigm spectrum rather than in strict categories and recognizing the overlap that exists.

Participants

This study used purposeful sampling, which allowed the researcher to select participants capable of providing new understanding of the questions posed by the study. Smith et al. (2009) proposed small, purposefully selected, homogenous participant groups for IPA. The use of a homogeneous sample is not based on an assumption that participants or their experiences were identical, but as a way to ensure consistency (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The study kept the number of participants small—seven were included. In line with the goals of IPA, a small number of participants allowed the researcher to focus on their individual lived experiences. To be eligible to take part in the study, participants were required to have attended at least grades 10-12 at an evangelical Christian school. Potential participants needed to currently or have formerly identified with evangelical Christianity. The study did not require participants of any particular gender or sexual orientation.

Participants needed to be emerging adults currently attending or recently graduated from a public or nonsectarian private college or university. Using Arnett's (2000) definition of emerging adult, prospective participants between 18 and 25 were considered. Most prospective participants attended large state universities in the South and Mid-Atlantic. However, students at any non-religiously affiliated college or university, public or private, were eligible to participate. Prospective participants were welcomed to forward the invitation to other students who might meet the study’s requirements. Individuals completing basic education requirements at a community college and planning to later attend a public university were also eligible to participate.
Recruitment and Access

To recruit participants to the study, invitations were initially being sent to former students of the researcher from two different evangelical Christian schools. Both institutions are members of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). The researcher distributed a call for participation flier by email and on Facebook and Twitter. It will explain the purpose of the study and requirements for participation. When participants respond to the researcher’s invitation, an initial meeting was scheduled to discuss the project and answer any questions. At that time, the informed consent documents and participants’ rights were discussed. The researcher discussed the steps that were taken to protect the participant’s anonymity, including how data was to be collected, transcribed, and stored. Potential participants were invited to forward the call for participation flier to others who meet the requirements for joining the study.

Protection of participants. Along with informed consent, Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggest that showing respect, honoring promises, refraining from pressuring participants, and doing no harm are the ethical responsibilities of researchers engaged in collecting qualitative data. Informed consent ensures that participation is voluntary in the study and that any dangers and obligations are known. A Participant Informed Consent Form was used to highlight the study’s purpose, data collection methods, benefits and risks of participating in the study, and assurances of confidentiality and freedom to withdraw from the study. The researcher made every effort to honor promises and not to pressure participants in any way to begin or continue in the study.

It is imperative that participants should not be harmed by their decision to take part in research; ideally, their participation will be beneficial (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Potential participants who expressed interest in participating in the study were sent an email with details of
the study’s purpose, along with potential benefits and risks. Potential benefits include the opportunity for participants to explore their religious beliefs and how the role they play in their identity construction. Participants in other IPA studies exploring faith and development have reported the interviewing experience as beneficial (Winslow, 2008). Opportunities to deal with conflict surrounding faith can lead to exhilarating new insights (Parks, 2000).

Potential risks for participants are related to exploring previously unexamined aspects of their identity, which can be emotionally painful (Kegan, 1998). The researcher made available to all participants the phone number of a pastor and counselor. The pastor is familiar with the details of this study and has agreed to talk with any participants that would like, free of charge. The study was optional, and participants were informed of their right to discontinue their participation. Since faith is a deeply personal construct, the researcher attempted to be respectful and nonjudgmental at all points in the interviews.

Participants’ identities were protected throughout the study. To protect anonymity, participants were given a pseudonym under which all findings were reported. Pseudonyms were chosen randomly from a list of common names from their decade of birth. Since participants came from a relatively small number of secondary schools, the potential for deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009) is an important concern. To protect participants from being identified through their responses, the researcher did not include specific details of experiences that might lead to their identification in the study’s results. The researcher also removed references to peers’, teachers’, and administrators’ roles and characteristics that might lead to identification of others. The results do not include specific details about the universities participants attend in order to further protect the anonymity of participants.

Data Collection
Describing data collection, Smith (2011) wrote, “Experience cannot be plucked straightforwardly from the heads of participants, it requires a process of engagement and interpretation on the part of the researcher” (p. 10). Such engagement requires careful planning and appropriate techniques. According to Smith et al. (2009), semi-structured, in-depth interviews are one tool researchers often use to engage participants in IPA research. Smith et al. (2009) recognized the widespread identification of semi-structured interviews as “conversation with a purpose” (p. 57), but noted that conversation can be misleading. The interview should be primarily the participant describing their experience to the researcher; however, participants may need occasional prompting to ensure further analysis will address the research question. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that closed-ended and leading questions be avoided. Researchers should instead ask probing questions that ask participants to describe, evaluate, compare, and tell stories about their experiences. (Murray & Holmes, 2013) warned that the researcher should carefully consider the ethics of questions. It is possible, they posited, to question in a way that leads participants to highlight stereotypical interpretations of their experience rather than explore their actual experience.

Accounting for these considerations, at least two semi-structured interviews were completed with each participant. When distance allowed for it, interviews were conducted in person at a private location chosen by the participant. When distance precluded face-to-face interviews, they were conducted from a distance using Skype or FaceTime at a time convenient to the participant. In the first interview, participants were asked questions about their experiences in an evangelical K-12 school. In the second interview, participants were asked to explore their college experiences and their identities as they currently understand them. The interviews were conducted at least a couple of days apart to minimize fatigue and allow adequate time for
reflection for the participant. After these interviews, participants were provided transcribed data and given the opportunity to correct and/or further elaborate on responses from the first two interviews.

**Data Storage**

With the consent of participants, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed from the recording. All data provided by participants become and remained the intellectual property of the researcher. No identifying data was included in the transcription data, other than the site of the study. The researcher and Rev.com, a third party transcription service, completed transcription. Other than the transcription service, only the researcher had access to audio recordings of the interviews. The researcher read transcripts along with the audio to verify accuracy and make note of audio cues that were not included in the transcript. All of the transcribed data was provided to participants, and they were given the opportunity to verify the data captured is accurate and represented as they intended. Only the researcher, participant, and peer reviewers had access to the transcripts of the interviews. Because the data from the study may be used for future studies, the anonymized transcribed data will be stored for three years on the researcher’s encrypted and password protected computer. Audio recordings will be kept for one year after the completion of the thesis. Data will be encrypted and backed up on DVDs, which will be stored in a fire-resistant safe in the researcher’s office. After three years, the data will be deleted and backups destroyed.

**Data Analysis**

Since IPA is both descriptive and interpretative (Larkin et al., 2006), collected data alone is insufficient for a study. Researchers must analyze the data to discover meaning and how meaning is made from participants’ experiences. The complex process of analyzing data is
inductive and iterative (J. A. Smith, 2007). The idiographic nature of IPA makes an iterative approach ideal, so that each unique participant’s case is considered (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), there is no one best way to analyze data. Researchers may use many varying approaches or sequences to find themes in the data; however, most approaches share common elements. In this study “reading and re-reading” (p. 82), “initial noting” (p. 83), “developing emergent themes” (p. 91), “searching for connections across emergent themes” (p. 92), and repeating the steps for other cases were used. The qualitative analysis software MaxQDA (MAXQDA, 2015) was used for organizing and analyzing transcribed data.

In line with Smith et al.’s (2009) suggestion for an iterative approach, the researcher first conducted a round of noting and searching for emergent themes using data from each participant’s interviews. Each case was first considered individually to minimize the effect of the researcher’s interpretations of the experiences of one participant in subsequent analyses. The researcher began to look for patterns that emerge across the cases after all cases are analyzed and attempt to synthesize them into a list of themes that transcends individual cases. Then, the researcher re-examined each case more deeply and consider how the identified themes apply to it. At this point, some themes emerged as subordinate or superordinate to other themes (Bigger staff & Thompson, 2008). Since the process of analysis in IPA is iterative and cyclical (J. A. Smith et al., 2009), the researcher went through portions of it a few times before thematic analysis is complete.

In the process of identifying themes, the researcher implemented a rigorous system of applying codes to data. According to Saldaña (2012), “in qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and
other analytic processes” (p. 4). In the first round of analysis, the researcher used holistic coding by assigning codes to large portions of the transcripts to develop an overarching view of the data. In subsequent iterations, the researcher coded using a more line-by-line approach. In a progression from particular to general, categories and subcategories emerged from the initial codes. From those categories, the researcher developed a list of themes which will form the basis for the study’s conclusions. Theorists disagree about how much data should be coded (Saldaña, 2012). In this study, the researcher followed Saldaña’s (2012) suggestion for novice researchers to code all of the collected data instead of discarding portions that do not immediately seem relevant.

**Trustworthiness**

Since the researcher is involved with interpreting meaning-making along with participants, researchers should explore how their positionality might influence findings (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). (LeVasseur, 2003) described how Husserl thought of the researcher could become almost transcendent, “‘bracketing’ lived experience by suspending assumptions about the existence of things and shifting attention to the actual phenomena in their intentionality and horizontality” (p. 413). Later theorists rejected the possibility of Husserl’s proposed separation of oneself from the essence explored (LeVasseur, 2003). Smith et al. (2009) explained, “truth claims of an IPA analysis are always tentative and analysis is subjective” (p. 80). Even though analysis is subjective in IPA, an organized and rigorous approach can allow for some level of verification (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The study used multiple checks to add to its trustworthiness.

As noted in Chapter 1, the researcher’s personal history with evangelical Christianity inspired this research. One potential hazard of the researcher’s involvement is conferring
experience to the voice of the student participants. During the interviews, the researcher will be careful to allow participants to speak freely and to ask open, non-leading questions. Additionally, while analyzing data and the considering emergent themes, the researcher will continually consider whether the findings authentically encapsulated participants’ stories or those of the researcher. The study’s rigorous approach to data analysis and the researcher’s continual recognition of their relationship to the study helped to produce trustworthy findings.

Participants’ role in interpreting meaning from their experiences alongside of the researcher in IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) added to the trustworthiness of the findings on this study. A few member-checking mechanisms were used. In the process of reading the transcripts to check for accuracy, participants may gain new insights about their experiences. The researcher asked participants to share those in a subsequent interview. New input was appended to the participants’ data and analyzed along with the initial interview transcripts. Additionally, in line with Creswell (2012), participants were asked to comment on the accounts, interpretations, and themes the researcher included or did not include. All participants indicated that they felt the themes and descriptions were accurate. Garrett, one participant in the study went concluded, “I have reviewed the findings and agree with the conclusions drawn by the researcher. I found them to be insightful and informed.” The participants’ feedback contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings.

The study’s advisor and readers served as peer reviewers, further strengthening its trustworthiness. In the role, they were invited to ask difficult questions about the methods employed and the interpretations of the researcher. Specifically, they considered whether findings flow logically from the data, the appropriateness of the themes chosen by the researcher, the degree of researcher bias, and the suitability of methodological decisions (Creswell, 2012).
Conclusion

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine the experiences with faith of graduates of evangelical Christian K-12 schools in nonsectarian universities. The researcher used purposeful selection to include participants with rich cases. Measures were established to protect participants from the minimal risks associated with the study, including their anonymity. The researcher conducted multiple rounds of interviews to collect qualitative data. After data collection, the researcher used an iterative approach to code and analyze the data. To increase trustworthiness of the findings, participants and outside readers reviewed the work and offered input on the study’s conclusions.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of individuals who graduated from evangelical Christian schools and attended nonsectarian colleges or universities. Each of the participants in the study described both their experiences attending a Christian high school and the transition to a college without religious affiliation in semi-structured interviews. This approach, in line with interpretative phenomenological analysis, or IPA, (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) allowed me to examine and better understand how participants make sense of their experience and religious identity.

Introduction to Categories and Themes

Through the data analysis process, themes and patterns emerged in the participants’ description of their experiences. The themes are presented in three categories. Category 1 delineates influences on religious identity development in high school, while category 2 describes influences on religious identity development in college. Category 3 explores themes of reconciliation of evangelical faith with new understandings. The themes are listed in the Table 1, below.

As a qualitative study, the themes reported in this chapter are not quantitative. The words “most”, “many”, and “some” are used to describe the degree to which a theme applies. In this study with seven participants, “most” is used to describe at least five, but not all participants. “Some” is used for more three or four participants.

Table 1: Categories and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Influences on identity development in high school</td>
<td>1.1 Participants described elements of their schools’ hidden curriculum as strong influences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Participants described elements of their schools’ formal curriculum as influences
   2. Participants viewed peers as a strong influence

2. Influences on identity development in college
   1. Participants identified interactions with non-Evangelical peers as strong influence
   2. Participants described decreased religiosity
   3. Participants viewed church and mission trips as a moderate influence

3. Reconciliation of evangelical faith with new understandings
   1. Beliefs
   2. Doubt
   3. Conflicting world views

### Profile of Participants

Seven participants who met the requirements of the study volunteered to take part. Their demographic information is listed in Table 2, along with their pseudonyms. Of the participants, three are male and four are female. Four, just over half, were nearing the end of their first year of college at the time of the interviews, while the others were further along in their college experience. Luke attended an evangelical Christian school for three years, the shortest of all participants. Blake attended the same Christian school for thirteen years, substantially longer than other participants. Four participants responded to the initial social media request for participants. One participant who found the interview process helpful told friends about the study, which led to the other three participants requesting to be involved. All of the participants in the study are white.

While the experience of attending an evangelical Christian high school and a nonsectarian university creates commonality between participants, each has a unique story. In the following profiles, I include details that will help the reader understand how participants experienced
developing religious identity differently. Additionally, salient quotes are included to allow participants to introduce themselves in each profile.

Table 2: Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in Evangelical Christian School</th>
<th>Year in College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>forth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenna</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Luke.** Luke is twenty years old and a college freshman pursuing a degree in horticulture. His parents transferred Luke to an evangelical Christian high school in the Mid-South when he was in the tenth grade. Luke remembers the decision for him to attend a Christian school being based primarily on his parents’ fears that he would be persuaded by “influences of the world” in his public high school—they were especially concerned about drugs. Luke’s family is religious and part of a Christian denomination he described as “fundamentalist”. He identifies as a Christian, but has disaffiliated with his parents’ denomination. Since graduating high school, Luke has become less religious and rarely attends church, even though he is still spiritual.

I am very firm in believing that there is a god who created us and .. It’s just something like when you talk and you really feel like the power, the spirit of God, you know, like, that's just a feeling that nothing else compares to. Uh, not really sure what denomination I affiliate myself with. But I see myself as a follower of a Christ. And you know, none of us are good Christians. We're all working at it, on our way.
Sexuality was one important dimension of Luke’s experience in a Christian high school since he identifies as bisexual. Even though fundamentalist Christianity was important to his parents, they were supportive. Luke remembers thinking that he could be kicked out of school if the wrong people found out, though, so he did not publicly come out until college. He is much more comfortable sharing about this aspect of his identity now than he was in high school.

My parents were more understanding than I honestly expected. Had a good support system, just couldn't come out at school... back in high school. But coming out at college, it's not a big deal. No one really cares at all. It's really nice.

One reason Luke decided to pursue his degree in horticulture is his interest in cultivating marijuana. He describes himself as a “medical marijuana user who enjoys it recreationally, too” and occasionally sells to other users. He hopes to eventually own a dispensary. Looking back, Luke found irony in his career aspirations, considering drugs were why his parents first decided to send him to a Christian school.

[The private school] wasn't necessarily as different from public school as my parents would have thought. Honestly, they put me in the private school because they were scared I would get into drugs. I wasn’t influenced ever to take drugs until I was attending the private school by fellow students.

Luke’s faith seems to be an important dimension of how he understands his identity, along with his sexuality and being a self-described “stoner.” It seems to bother him that even though he reconciles these three dimensions, his parents, former teachers, and some peers often do not.

**Megan.** Megan is a nineteen year old college sophomore working on a degree in nursing. She attended an evangelical Christian school from seventh grade until she graduated. She considers herself a non-denominational Christian who is fairly active in her church. She
described her high school experience positively, and especially appreciated small class sizes and the integration of faith in classes.

Uh, overall it was awesome. I never really had any big issues with it. It was always just something that like I enjoyed. I mean I don't know, I liked being in a smaller environment and so being in that kind of place was so much fun compared for me. I got to know people more on a personal level rather than being in class with like 600 kids. And so, getting to do that, plus getting to go to a place where they do talk about God constantly, and you know, its integrated in everything, to me that was awesome. I loved getting to know more and more.

Megan felt her family and church kept her well-grounded while her friends underwent significant change. She saw theater, drugs, and alcohol as negative influences in her school.

There was a group of us and we were all super close. We were like, I mean, pretty on fire for God back in 7th grade. As we got older, a majority of that group got into theater, and that has its own stuff with it. You know, what they're okay with on stage, what they're okay with doing… And then there's the other group that got into more of the partying, got into more of the drugs and alcohol and all of that. So, that kind of you know, my close friends started going totally different ways than I did. I guess just trying to stay true to who I was while all of my friends were doing that was insane. You know, I grew up in church and was super involved in church.

Going on local and international mission trips is a central part of Megan’s experience of being a Christian. Her school and church both organized trips for student groups to go to Latin American and African countries. Megan’s favorite part of the trips is “ministering to the children” in
schools and church programs. She has spent at least part of every summer since middle school on a trip and is planning on doing another this summer.

**Miranda.** Miranda is a twenty-two year old recent college graduate. She majored in elementary education and has almost completed her first year teaching middle school. Miranda attended public schools through eighth grade before transferring to an evangelical Christian high school. She was not excited about the transition, as she comically described:

> [My parents] decided that I was going to go to a private school. And, somehow, they ended up really liking [school name]. And I went in for an interview, and, being the angsty 8th grader that I was, I told [individual's name] in my interview, I don't want to be here, don't let me into your school. And I wrote in my admissions essay, which asked me, "tell us why you want to go to [school name]." And I wrote, "I don't want to go to [school name], I'm only here because my parents are forcing me to go, and please do not let me into your school." [laughter] And, I think they saw that, as like, “Oh my God, this child needs Jesus, we have to help her!” [laughing] kind of thing, so alas, I ended up there for 9th grade. And that was my first experience at a private school. Miranda recounted ambivalent feelings about her experience. While she largely appreciated the education she received at the school, a few negative episodes really impacted the way she views her experience at the school now.

> The first couple of years, it was about surviving. I came a little bit more into my own my last two years, my junior and senior year. But, definitely for a while, it was mostly about survival. And I kind of felt like that at graduation. Like, yes, finally, I made it out. [laughing] It wasn't all bad though. I feel like I've said a lot of negative things about [the school], but it wasn't all bad. Like I said, I feel like I did get a really good education
there, especially humanities-wise, that prepared me for the things that I needed to do in college. Especially as it came to things like writing research papers and making debates and making arguments and things like that. Um, I think I wouldn't have gotten those things in a public school. At least, not to the same extent. So, it wasn't all necessarily bad. Some of it was, but not all of it.

Faith became more important to Miranda after going to a Christian school and she is still a practicing Christian. She is actively involved in her mainline Protestant church, where she leads mission trips and mentors girls in the student program. Miranda maintains active friendships with people she went to school with, and they often discuss religious topics when they are together.

**Blake.** Blake is a twenty-two year old college senior majoring in computer science. He was the only participant in the study that spent their entire pre-college education in an evangelical Christian school.

[T]he thing for me when it comes to Christian education, is of course, it's all I've ever known. That's all I've ever done. I started in kindergarten going to a school that as related to my church… Um, then in first grade, I switched over to [school name], and then stuck with that for 12 years. So, uh, if there's one thing that's memorable about the experience, it's just how homogenous it was. You know, I never moved to different schools or anything like that. I knew the same people when I was 17 that I did when I was 6.

Faith seems to have always played an important role in the way Blake thinks about the world. Most of the stories he told incorporated his Christian beliefs, and he identified religion as one of the major themes of his experience.

I remember being personally very convinced and convicted in my faith throughout high school. I never really had serious doubts. I would do my best to question it and have
intellectual discussions with myself about it, and try to convince myself. But I never really considered that the answer to "is the Christian God real?" would ever be no. However, Blake described a personal transformation in college of becoming more open-minded of other people and their ideas, which led to changes in his faith.

Not every other person besides you is stupid. They probably have pretty good reasons for why they believe what they believe. Um, and I would certainly say I'm a more cynical and doubtful Christian than I was before. I certainly much less confident in my faith than I once was, even if I am still very much a Christian ultimately, that is still how I would consider myself.

Faith is still a part of Blake’s life, even though he questions some and out rightly disagrees with other of the doctrines he was taught at his evangelical school.

**Garrett.** Garrett is a twenty-one year old college junior who recently changed majors from music to philosophy. He started attending an evangelical Christian school in the seventh grade after dealing with merciless bullying in his public school. He described an experience of feeling more accepted during his high school years.

I feel like for seventh and eighth grade I was mostly tolerated there. There were a few people there who, who were nice and you know, did try to involve me in things. But mostly I was tolerated and ignored, which I was quite okay with.

By his senior year, though, Garrett felt like he fit in with his classmates.

One thing that may have made assimilation difficult was Garrett’s doubt of surrounding the historicity of Christianity. He described substantial doubt about the Judeo-Christian creation narrative and intelligent design theories. Even though he has classified himself as agnostic since high school, Garrett spoke with a deep respect for Christianity,
I, being steeped in religion by [school name], and by spending most of my life in a church via you know either chapel that [school name] had every Monday or singing in churches for the boy choir performing services or masses, I, I have a fairly deep understanding of Christianity from ... Both from an objective and a little bit from a subjective point of view. I, I have a very deep respect for the teachings of Christianity and if I weren't so confined by my need to have solid answers and evidence, that I probably would also profess a Christian faith.

I follow a Christian standard of living without the faith. I, I consider myself a man of principle. I consider myself a man of ethics. You know, I have a code of honor that I follow or try to as much as I can. And I, I am very fiercely driven by my ethics and my morals and my own damned pride, but I, in, in that way, I see religion influencing my mindset. My, my way of living is very in line with, you know, Christian doctrine. Love thy neighbor as thyself, you know, go the extra mile, you know, most of Christ's teachings.

**Jenna.** Jenna is eighteen years old and wrapping up her first year of college in a nursing program. She decided that she wanted to transfer from public school to an evangelical Christian school half way through her ninth grade year. Jenna’s transition to a Christian school was different from other participants’ because she personally sought out a more religious educational experience.

I decided I didn't really like it and it wasn't really for me so I switched to [school name] because my cousin went there. And, um, I really liked it. I enjoyed it. I didn't like public school because I didn't like what I was exposed to or didn't, you know, feel comfortable. I didn't feel like that's where I was supposed to be. And I think [school name], it really
gave me a new view on Christianity and my relationship with God and things like that. It just kind of opened that up, opened that door. It was more easily accessible to be able to grow in my relationship [with God].

The most important aspect of faith for Jenna seemed to be a “personal relationship” with God. When I asked her what she meant by that phrase, Jenna explained that to her, God was knowable and relatable much like she knows and relates to her parents or friends. She seemed thankful that her school helped her understand God better in that way.

Before I came to [school name], I just went to church and, you know, went through that Sunday routine and went to youth group maybe a couple times but once I came to [school name] I was able to establish, you know, this communication, this personal-ness with God that I didn't have before. You know, I knew he was there and I knew that, you know, that was important. And I knew what he had done for me and what it means to be a Christian but never really lived it out. And so going to [school name] and, you know, constantly, you know, being pushed or being, you know, like, encouraged to read the Bible on my own and to, you know, do those things. I was able to practice those once I left, in my home, you know. I go home for the day or the weekend or I'd be more excited to try to read my Bible outside of class or, you know, pray more often.

Just those aspects of being ... having a relationship with God and developing this like personal-ness. Because I think before [school name] I didn't look it at ... look at God as if someone that you could really relate to on like a personal level like he was a person, you know, that you could talk to and you could, you know, speak to like you would talk to your parents or your best friend about your problems and stuff. And so [school name] helped develop that for me, at least. You know, just ... he's this personal person that you
can talk to everyday and you read about the Bible and it's this living book, it's not just this old book that has a little meaning. So I think it helped me develop a relationship with him rather than just this idea of him, I think.

Even though she does not attend church nearly as often as she did when she was in high school, faith still seemed to be an integral part of Jenna’s identity.

**Haley.** Haley is nineteen and finishing her first year of college studying special education. She completed four years of high school at an evangelical Christian school. Haley described the transition from a large public school to a small private school, where everyone seemed so similar, to be a bit of a culture shock.

At first, I hated it, and I think I definitely acted like I hated it, and that, kind of, sucked for everyone and it wasn't really a good experience. I didn't want to be there. But then, at the end, I really enjoyed myself and I had like a group of friends… I guess like, it went from bad to good. I wouldn't change it.

Haley’s family is Catholic, and she felt like she was missing some of the common background knowledge her new, mostly protestant, peers shared about the Bible and evangelical culture.

I remember that we watched Veggie Tales in OT [Old Testament Bible class], and I was like, "I've never seen this show before.” Like, what the hell is this? And everyone was like, "You've never seen Veggie Tales?” And I was like, "Nooooo..."

Like Miranda and Megan, mission trips played a large role in Haley’s religious experience in high school. She was invited by another student at her school to go on a trip with a protestant church’s youth group.
And then um, she invited me on the mission trip, and I went, and I had a great time, and then, some of the church was like, "Come to church" and I was like, "Okay." And I showed up, and that's like ... It's weird because I went to this Christian school for two years, and I didn't like it. I hated it, but I started going to [a Protestant church] and that's what made me a Christian. Like, that experience changed me rather than the school which was, I thought kind of ironic.

Religion seems to be very important to Haley. She attends church at least weekly and volunteers in its youth group.

1. **Evangelical Christian High School**

Participants identified influences on their identity development that they encountered in high school. Of these, most strong influences included the school’s hidden curriculum, its formal curriculum, and peers. In each category, multiple themes emerged.

1.1 **Hidden curriculum.** Participants described elements of their schools’ hidden curriculum as being strong influences on their religious identity development. For many of them the homogeneity of their schools made lasting impressions. Even though participants described most of the people in their school as being very similar in religious and political beliefs, most experienced being “Other” in one way or another. Some participants described limited opportunity to explore ideas that contradicted generally accepted beliefs at their school, and all described their various Christian schools as a “bubble”. The Christian construct of “sin,” especially as applied to LGBTQ people was a source of conflict for four participants. A couple also reflected on shortcomings of their schools of not providing adequate sexual education. Few felt their Christian school teachers’ portrayal of college to be anti-Christian were realistic. This
section reports how participants described the role elements of the hidden curriculum in their schools played in the development of their religious identity.

**Homogeneity.** The evangelical school participants attended lack diversity in many categories. There are few students of color and almost no students from non-Christian families. For Miranda, the majority of students were religious or seemed to be religious. She said, “I feel like we had a lot of really, really religious people.” She added, “I feel like most people, they either were religious or they pretended enough to be that I didn't notice that they weren't. If that makes sense.” Luke knew some students who weren’t Christians at his school, but also saw tremendous pressure for them to conform to traditional evangelical beliefs, both from teachers and other students.

If you had another viewpoint, they [faculty] didn't necessarily want to hear it, or if you did speak up, they would kind of laugh it off. And be like, "No, no, no, this is how it is." And other students, you would get more, negative feedback, just based on your personal viewpoints. I do know there were other students there that didn't necessarily identify [as Christians] and they were always being questioned constantly. Like, "why do you believe that, you know that's wrong." And constantly having something you believe just torn down and people throwing something in your face saying that it is wrong or why their view is right. You know will make you think eventually that maybe your viewpoint isn't right or question it.

The homogeneity stretches even further, though. Miranda also described how it seemed conformity to Republican political beliefs was expected of students.

But, looking back during those high school years, I'm like oh my gosh, we were so just like living in a bubble, this bubble of people who all, even if they don't all think the same
way, they pretend to all think the same way. And it's expected that everyone thinks the same way. Where everyone is this white, conservative Christian Republican and just, everyone kind of has those same beliefs and same ideals.

Megan told me about a time her government class collectively took a political belief assessment. Her anecdote also illustrates how students might feel everyone holds similar conservative political beliefs. She recalled, “I think it was my senior year, we took, like the "I side with" quiz, to figure out like what political side [we were on]. Our class ended up being like 99% Republican when it came down to it.” All participants mentioned uniformity, or at least an expectation of uniformity from faculty, of beliefs on core religious and political principles.

**Experience as “Other”**. Even though evangelical Christian schools are often homogeneous, especially with regards to religion and race, many participants felt “othered” at times. Girls reported discrimination based on their gender. One student felt tremendous struggle because of his sexual identity. Some students who came from non-evangelical families described their peers and teachers as tolerant of their beliefs. One participant reported feeling pressure to conform to doctrines acceptable to the denomination of his school’s affiliation, though. These accounts of how participants felt different from dominant groups provide some insight into how participants construct identity as an intersection of multiple dimensions.

**Gender**. Three of the four women who participated in the study told stories of gender discrimination from their high school experience. Their stories described less financial support for all female extracurricular programs than all male ones, more responsibility for adhering to dress code regulations than boys, and more scrutiny for girls in leadership roles than boys from administrators. According to Megan, boys’ athletics programs received more funding for equipment and travel that girls’ sports did.
They focused a lot on the guy's sports and paid for their meals. And made sure they had the best equipment and all that. So, being in athletics as a girl was kind of like, "Oh, thanks.." We had to pay for our own meals when we went on trips. Finally, at the very end, it was play-offs, and we finally got the school to pay for one of our meals. And so, we were like, "okay.." [Frustrated]

Megan also felt boys also got special treatment in the application of dress code rules.

They [boys] can kind of get away with a little bit more. Like dress code-wise, they probably could. Or they started to. I know I got called out for a couple of things. Like, I had pockets on my pants one time. I was like, okay, do you see, there are 5 other guys, there are 5 guys sitting over there and they all have pockets. And, they were allowed to. And they didn't get called out, but I did.

For Jenna, modesty is an important virtue. She appreciated that her school enforced its dress code strictly. Even though she viewed the dress rules favorably, she recognized that they impacted girls more than boys.

Well, I just think ... I think it's harder for ... It was harder for girls, I think.... it was very difficult. It was hard for ... for certain girls. I think they take ... Would take offense to that, you know. Offense to someone judging the way that they dress or having to watch what you dress. But, I thought it was a ... It was a good quality of [school name] to have those kinds of, you know, values and rules but they definitely were easier to enforce and were strong ... More strongly enforced on girls because [it was easier for them] to break those rules.

Jenna spoke a lot about her “relationship with God”. For her, one important part, maybe the most important part, of her religion was this relationship. She described a connection between
upholding expectations for modesty with maintaining the relationship. Jenna reported more importance being placed on the link between the two for girls than for boys.

Well, um, now that I'm here at my big public university I think [school name] did a great job of, you know, making us feel, you know, like our Christianity and our religion and our relationship with God was important. And they had great rules to instill those, you know. And my Bible class and, you know, expectations and dress code, a stricter dress code, you know, that really taught girls and males, but mostly girls to, you know, be modest and all these different things besides just your relationship with God is important. You know, the way you act and the way you look and dress and ... So there's all these awesome things.

Even though Jenna describes dress code expectations as “awesome,” it does highlight one way her school’s standards were different for boys than for girls.

Haley remembered the way boys were treated differently at her school with more disdain. She told about a time when she and some other girls wanted to start a Bible study group. They expected the administrators to be supportive of their effort to take leadership and mentor other students. However, they had to meet extra requirements. According to Haley, it was because other student Bible studies were led by boys.

When we started our Bible study, [administrator] was like, "You have to have a curriculum. You have to have all this. You have to get a specific book." But we were like, “[boy who led another Bible study] doesn't have to have that. Like, he can just do whatever he wants. Nobody is even in the room with them." Like, we had to have an adult in the room, and he didn't. So it was really ... That was the first time I ever felt I
guess like things were really unfair and like, it was just ... I don't know. I'll always remember that.

In addition to different treatment by administrators, Haley remembered boys ignoring girls in her class most of the time. One time, they tried to generate lunchtime conversation by sitting in a new configuration.

We all decided, all the girls, we were like, we're gonna sit on one side of the table, so the guys have to sit across from us. Because that was like how deep the divide was. Like, unless you were dating one of them, or unless they wanted to get in your pants, like, they, it wasn't, you know, I mean like, they didn't care. And like, they weren't interested. And like, having a normal decent conversation with a girl. It was weird. It was really weird. I had never experienced that. And so, like we all sat on one side, all the girls, and then the guys literally crowded at the ends of the table, so they didn't have to sit across from us. It was pathetic. It was really pathetic.

Much research (Stitzlein, 2008) has reported overtly sexist material in the formal curricula of Christian schools. However, most of the women who participated in this study did not talk about it. Instead, they described covert messages that their male peers were more capable of leadership roles and valuable as athletes, and less responsible for modesty than they were.

Sexual orientation. For Luke, sexuality seems to be a much more central aspect of identity than for other participants. He was the only participant that identified as non-heterosexual. His school taught that acting on same-sex attraction was sinful. He grew up believing there was something wrong with him because of his parents’ and church’s teachings.

Growing up, since I was I don't know, I think 7, I've been attracted to guys. But growing up in a Pentecostal home, I was always told, taught, that if someone was gay, they were
possessed. And it was really hard, coming through this struggle. Because, at one point I believed I was possessed just because of how I felt. And that could cause some emotional distress on a child. Or someone going through puberty trying to find out who they are. You know, scared that if their parents found out, or something, they'd be ashamed of them.

He remembered being fearful of negative reactions from peers and that he could be kicked out of school if the wrong people knew he was bisexual.

One thing that I really struggled with is that I identify as a bisexual male, but I could, I was very fearful to come out to my fellow students because I knew I would be extremely bigoted against… But I would, I would just have random people that I don't really associate with come like, and ask me if I was gay or something. I would just laugh it off, and be like, "no, I'm not gay." You know, I just wouldn't tell them exactly what my sexuality is. Just kind of play it off, you know laugh it off or whatever. Myself, I didn't personally feel like it was a big deal. At [the Christian school], I was scared I could get kicked out, honestly, if certain people in, found out I guess, certain teachers, or the headmaster, et cetera found out.

Even if he didn’t “feel like it was a big deal,” Luke struggled with having to hide his sexuality. I asked Luke if he was ever to talk about this part of his identity with anyone at his school. He described a mixed response from fellow students, and was able to keep it from teachers altogether until after graduation.

That was while I was still at the school. That was the last few months before graduation. At that point, it was less than six months before graduation when I had told someone.

And I thought in my head, we're this close, they don't have to keep a secret that long. You
know, like, after graduation, I'm not going to like have a big coming out. I'm just not
going to have to hide it anymore. You know if anyone is shocked by it, they can be
shocked by it, and I can live my life knowing it's not a big deal. And if it's a big deal to
them, I don't have to see them every day and deal with whatever opinions or judgments
they have about it. But since I did make the mistake of telling a couple of people there, it
did come out, and there were those that were immature and rude about it. And would
make jokes directed towards me. But they never had, you know affirmation 100%, they
just had hearsay and you know could see that I just played it off or whatever. But then
there were other students who, I didn't always think I was as close to, but they told me
that they were like, "I don't, I honestly don't give a shit man if you like guys." I had a
fellow teammate who from football who told me that. That was really nice to know that
not everyone felt the same way and that other people were accepting. And didn't see it as
a big deal. But I definitely did have to deal with that.

*Religious beliefs.* Four of the seven participants came from evangelical Christian families,
an in that way, were part of the majority in their schools. Garrett’s father is a non-practicing
Christian and mother is atheist. He has identified as agnostic since high school. Miranda’s family
attended a mainline Protestant church, but was not as religious as many peers’ families at her
school. Haley grew up Catholic, but started going to a protestant church a couple of years after
she started at her evangelical school. Luke was raised Pentecostal, but also started attending a
church that was part of a more accepted denomination at his school after he attended for a couple
of years.
Garrett found his peers and teachers accepting and supportive of his doubts about Christianity. In a science class, one of his teachers taught young-Earth creationism. Garrett expressed his doubts to his teacher felt good about the response he received.

I need proof of these things. I need evidence. So, you know, going into [school name] and being expected to be or to accept the Bible on blind faith was just something that I couldn't do and I still can't do. I ... I’m… When I was younger I was definitely more aggressive about it but as I got older it became less aggressive. I, I actually remember talking to one of my profess- teach, not professors, teachers after class and I said ... I was, I feel like I was really stubborn at, during this day. But I made sure everyone was out of the room and I said, "Look, I, I don't believe this. I will need proof, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But I, I will still work as though this were a you know, science class. I will, you know, work my hardest but ... I can't be expected to accept what you are telling us." I think he was a little bit surprised that I had the gall to say that to him but he, he took it well. He said, you know, "That's, that's fine. I don't expect everyone to share the same beliefs." He, he was quite tolerant and, you know, that was the only issue that I ever had with him. But, well, not issue. The only time we ever talked about it.

Even though Miranda came from a Christian home and believed most of the same things as her peers, she felt “inadequate” because she was not as religious as others when she arrived at her Christian school. Over a few years in high school, though, she found she was able to fit in and participate more and more.

Um, well definitely coming in as a 9th grader, like I said, it was very intimidating. Because I felt surrounded by like all of these people who really knew what they were doing. And knew a lot about Christianity and a lot abbot God. And I just didn't. So I felt
really inadequate. And, I guess, I felt like I wasn't as smart and I wasn't as, I guess, worthy of being called a Christian. Because I, up until then, had always considered myself a Christian. But I hadn't really thought about it that much. And it definitely wasn't something that I thought about every day. And, I guess really applied a lot in my life. Which I guess probably didn't make me a very good Christian. But I mean, I was 14, I didn't really know what I was doing.

Um, but, it was intimidating, and it made me feel uncomfortable a lot of the time. And also, it made me feel like I couldn't participate as much in class as I wanted to. Because I was always the person who was all about participating in class. And like raised my hand all of the time. But then, as all these people started, you know, to say things about God or defend their arguments using the Bible, I was like, well, I don't really have anything to contribute to this conversation, so I'm just going to stay quiet. Um, so I kind of felt, I'm losing my words..., I guess stifled. I felt stifled, because I felt I wasn't able to contribute because I wasn't as knowledgeable about my faith.

And like I said, that all kind of changed in my last 2 years, this was mostly applying to my first 2 years when I was still making that adjustment. Um, I felt a lot more able to participate in those discussions and I felt a lot more confident in defending myself in my faith in my later years. Like when I was a junior or senior. So something, it was almost like a skill that I just got better at by being surrounded by people who did it a lot. But, coming in as 9th grader who didn't really, I didn't know what was going to happen, so it kind of came as a shock. It was, it was a culture shock, because I had come from a public school where you don't ever do that into a school where that's encouraged and everyone does it all the time. So it was a big, big transition for me.
Haley grew up Catholic, but started going to a mainline Protestant church with a friend after a couple of years attending her evangelical school. I asked her if she felt any stigma when she came to an evangelical school.

Um, I wasn't aware of it at first because I didn't really realize that there was any difference, like I thought we were all just Christians, and kumbaya. But um, I mean, they would always like ... A lot of my class when we would have discussions, especially in like History, would be like, "Oh, ask like [Haley] or whoever else was a Catholic, like they're Catholic. And I didn't, it didn't really bother me but like, I didn't even know there was a stigma, and so, if there was one, I don't think I noticed it. Just I noticed that like if something came up, it would, we were out, we were kinda like singled out as Catholic people, but it wasn't a big deal.

Luke said that Pentecostalism is often viewed as a part of larger evangelicalism. At his school, however, he felt his family’s denominational affiliation set him apart from many of his peers. He explained that Pentecostals believe most of the same things as other evangelicals, but do not believe in the Trinity. They also adhere strict modesty rules. In the church he grew up in, boys and men are not allowed to wear shorts or have long hair. Girls do not cut their hair and wear long skirts instead of pants. Luke remembered negative attention because of different theological beliefs and dress standards.

At the, when I first started attending the school, I identified as a Pentecostal and at the academy, there was a lot of jokes and most of the students attending I would say identified as non-denominational or Baptist. And, these affiliations of Christians weren't as strict as the affiliation that I came from and the values that my religion held were kind of joked about. I didn't necessarily take offense from it personally, I could take a joke and
laughed it off, but other students that were the same religion, er affiliation as me, Pentecostals, felt targeted and that they were being bigoted towards by the other Christian affiliations just because they had somewhat different beliefs, dressed a little bit differently. After attending there, I did change my affiliation. I do no longer identify as a Pentecostal. I believe I was already on the way of not wanting to be a Pentecostal and then once attending there, I kind of felt pushed that along further. Definitely pushed that faster. Because, if I had not attended the academy, I would have continued to be a Pentecostal until I was 18 and had moved out of my household. My parents had been very firm about that. But after I attended the private academy, uh, I guess just after there was just more influence for me to have my own faith. And, they were a little more lenient and let me go to a church that wasn't quite as strict.

For Haley and Luke, denominational affiliation became one component of religious identity. Through people they met at their school, they cut ties with the denomination of their families in favor of evangelical groups. Even though there seemed to be more pressure for Luke to conform than there was for Haley, neither suggested any resentment or second thoughts surrounding their decisions.

**Room for belief non-conformity.** Some participants brought up varying levels of feeling comfortable expressing thoughts and beliefs that did not conform to the generally accepted religious and political beliefs at their school. Garrett felt supported when he asked questions non-confrontationally, especially when they did not personally challenge others’ faith. I asked him if he felt comfortable asking questions that about faith.

It, it depends upon the kinds of questions. There are definitely times when asking questions is encouraged, but it's, it's the type of questions that sometimes are looked
down upon because you're questioning someone's you know, entire worldview. The, the very foundation of what they believe and you're questioning it. They, you can't expect someone to not be at least a little bit offended by that. And granted, it's almost entirely in the way you phrase it, which I was poor at at the time. Probably still am. But ... If, if phrased in a constructive way, I believe questioning was, you know, encouraged and, you know, they couldn't always provide acceptable answers, at least for me, because a lot of the things that I was asking questions about were questions that required, you know, faith.

Miranda described one civics class where the teacher was a committed Republican. She called the curriculum “heavily biased” towards traditionally Republican stances. I asked her if she felt comfortable expressing opinions that contradicted or questioned the teacher’s views. I didn't feel like there was. I think, um, this particular teacher's personality made it scary to try to disagree. Uh, I feel like there were a lot of times where some of us would kind of exchange glances during class. Just you know, we would hear something and kind of look at each other and kind of just shake our heads and be like, you know, this is crazy! Or like, I don't think that's right, but none of us really said anything because we didn't think it was worth arguing, because it felt like every time we tried to argue, we just got shot down regardless of what our arguments were. Or how well we thought we were defending them.

Miranda also recalled how teachers used religious language to support what they taught as true. I think even though some things weren't being out rightly, I guess stated, as religious, there were religious undertones and just religious references… Sometimes it was things like “this is what I think God says” or like “this is what the Bible is telling us”, just like
undertones and like just kind of references thrown in here and there to kind of make us think that what they were saying was being supported by their religious beliefs.

For Luke, what schools taught about sexuality had a special importance. I asked him what advice he would give to a current student at his school who does not believe it is sinful to be LGBTQ or an ally.

Some things, it's probably more beneficial if you just keep it on the down-low and just don't approach the subject. If anyone asks, laugh it off, cuz everything is a joke. You don't have to see these people ever again after so long.

His response suggested to me that he felt it was not worth the effort to question the generally accepted beliefs as a high school student. I would be more beneficial to just survive until leaving, as Luke put it, “the bubble.”

_Bubble_. Most of the participants used the phrase “the bubble” at some point during the interviews. The term seemed to have both negative and positive connotations. Jenna described it as a place that shelters students from the parts of the world that would keep them from God. Many students used it negatively, though, as a place that kept students from knowing what the world was really like. Miranda saw how students who had little experience outside of “the bubble” had a difficult time adjusting in college.

The world is made up of so many different people and different kinds of people, um, that don't fit into that bubble that we all made for ourselves at [school name]. Um, and I knew that, and I think a lot of us, a lot of us were aware of that. But then, some of us who had been in that private school, or even [school name] for our whole lives I think had just had that bubble so engrained in them, that when they went to college, I think it was a culture shock for them because they had never been in that kind of environment before. Um, I
had had up through 8th grade to prepare me for that. And then, I was still involved with
Girl Scouts and soccer and things like that outside of school. That kind of kept me
grounded and like okay, this is my [school name] bubble, but life exists outside of it. And
like, there's so many things that we don't get taught and don't get talked about inside that
bubble. But, that's not how the world is. Like, this is the world and I think a lot of people
weren't prepared for it when they graduated. And I think it was hard for them going to
college. Because of that.

Jenna saw how “the bubble” insulated her community, but also how the protection was
valuable for spiritual growth.

You know, [school name] kind of shelters you from those things but ... So it's kind of one
of those like good things, bad things because it keeps you from those things and you're
able to work on your relationship with God, but you're really in this bubble, this small
bubble.

Luke felt like an outsider for much of his experience at his high school. He described “the
bubble” more negatively when talking about his transition into college.

It's kind of been like, a big, like since like sigh of relief. You know what I mean? Out of
like this really constricted, strict environment and just you know, being able to be myself.
Uh, at school, I can ask questions and not you know be judged or feel like I'm being
pushed to the edge of the bubble, per se. Uh, definitely been able to take more classes,
and uh, just be exposed to new and different things that I was not gonna, wasn't capable
of happening I feel like at the academy I was attending.

“Sin.” The idea of “sin” came up in many of the interviews. As discussed in Chapter 2, “sin”
is a key construct in Christianity that is often used to differentiate between Christians and various
groups of Others. For participants, it seems the most memorable application of the label was
towards LGBTQ people, and at times, their allies. One student also recounted being labelled a
“sinner” because she read Harry Potter books.

Sexuality. Four participants talked quite a bit about personal struggle with their school’s
heteronormative beliefs about sexuality. It seems faculty from all of the schools represented in
the study presented LGBTQ people as sinful. Luke described feeling worth less than his peers
because faculty or administrators who knew about his sexual identity would most likely consider
him sinful.

The school's doctrinal stance on homosexuality was that it was a sin and so, I feel like
that was evident. They believed it was a choice rather than you know how you're born.
And that you were choosing to sin or choosing to not follow God by having certain
feelings or whatever.

As a general rule, Luke tried to not confront peers when they brought up sexuality. He said that
one time, though, he just could not keep listening without speaking up.

Someone who had been attending the school their entire life, what they called, "from the
bubble". And raised there from kindergarten to high school when they graduated. And
they were talking about how they didn't understand someone, how a girl would be lesbian
and like another girl who was a dyke, who you know, dressed not necessarily feminine.
And, was like, "why don't they just date a dude?" And I, at that point, had to speak up,
because well, they don't like males. You know, using exact terminology, it's because they
don't like dicks. And they were like, they got all offended and huffy, and like "they
shouldn't dress up like a guy." And I was like, well some people just dress like a guy
because they identify as a guy. And that brought up this whole conversation about how
that's wrong and you know how if you're born one way, if you're born a girl, you should act like a girl and be a girl. If you're born a guy, that you know you have to be raised in sports. And if you do sports and all of that, they also didn't understand how a guy could want to be a girl, or how a transgender person that was male to female could be raised as a boy and go through all of that but still you know feel like that. They didn't understand that and frowned upon it. And at that point, I just couldn't continue having the conversation with that person and had to leave as they were stuck in the mud. With their opinions.

Miranda said she was “brainwashed… anti-gay” in high school. Now that she is removed from that environment, she described remorse for the beliefs she held.

Um, and I know we definitely got a lot of anti-gay teaching. Which is something that, that's one of those things where I look back on myself and I'm ashamed of what high school [Miranda] used to think. Because I used to be not really, I wouldn't say homophobic, because that would imply like a phobia, but I was brainwashed I would say into being anti-gay. Um, and thinking that homosexuality was a sin, which is something that I have completely done a 180 on since then. I kind of, I feel like I was brainwashed because it was something that I was fine with up through 8th grade and I knew a lot of my friends were starting to figure things out about themselves and telling me that they were gay, and I was fine with it. Then, I went to [school name] and kind of was hearing these things and being taught these things. And it kind of became internalized, and then it became something that I believed. And then I went to college and I met all of these people who were part of that community and I'm like, all of these people are basically good people and I don't think that they are sinning. And I think Jesus would be happy to
know that there is some more love in the world. So, um, that's definitely something that's changed since I've been at [school name]. It's something that I look back on myself and kind of like, ew, I regret that a lot, I feel really guilty about that.

LGBTQ people were presented by teachers as being sinful in Miranda’s school.

Mmhm, I think a lot of it was that we were being taught that it was a sin because, I, I guess there's references in the Bible to implications that it is a sin. And, I know that in our civics classes and stuff, there was a lot of talk about like the whole, like, rights for gay people and the right for them to get married and stuff. And I just remember over and over and over again, our teachers shooting that down. And being very against that idea, the idea for gay people to be allowed to get married. Because the thought that it was a sin. So, I think that was a lot of it… Like I said, looking back, it is something that I deeply regret. Um, and I see now that a large part of what they taught us was wrong and things that I don't agree with now.

Haley’s experience with anti-LGBTQ dogma came from peers and teachers. She described how her effort to be an ally at her school led to teasing from other students.

I was in class, and we were talking, and I was saying that I was reading It by Stephen King. And this one kid said, "Oh yeah, what part are you on?" And I said, "Oh, they just beat up the gay guy." And he was like, "Oh, good. He deserved it." And I was like, "What?" And he was like, "Gay people are bad, blah blah blah," and I was like, "...huh?" And like, my teacher came in, and she was like, "Homosexuality is not okay."

And I was like ... I was like arguing with her, and like, I guess I didn't even realize that like, class wasn't the place to do it because I was like so taken aback… And like I got teased about it for a while because they were like, "Oh [Haley] thinks gays are cool," and
I was like, "I don't have a problem with them," but anyways, that was like a big thing for me.

Part of the reason Haley felt the need to speak up in her class stemmed from having a friend in public school who was gay. She brought up his story in class at her Christian school once. She response from her teacher made her think Christians would rather accept a god who made mistakes than one who created LGBTQ people.

I mean, my friend [name] had always been bullied and he had said to me, one time, he was like, "You know, if I could change, I would. But like, this is who I am as much as it is who you are." And I said that in class one day when we got into a discussion about that, and my teacher said, and I said, "So how do you like make sense of that, like, if God, like, doesn't make mistakes, like, I know he doesn't. So like, like if God is perfect and he makes everyone, like how do you make sense of this?" And he goes, "Well, I guess God made a mistake." And I was like, "What?" Like, no.

**Books.** Only one participant, Miranda, discussed how some families in her school viewed books as sinful. However, her story about the condemnation she received for reading books in the Harry Potter series provides a powerful description of one of her defining experiences in a Christian high school. A classmate’s parent felt so strongly that reading the books was sinful they told Miranda she would go to Hell for reading them.

One of my absolute worst experiences, probably of my life up until that point, was when I was on a field trip. And you know, at [school name], we didn't have field trip busses or anything. So most of our field trips were, you know, people's parents driving us around. And I remember one time in 10th grade, when I was 15, my friend's mom was driving us all back from a field trip, and one of my friends just kind of off-handedly referenced the
fact that I liked Harry Potter. And my friend's mom, who I had just met that day, went off on this tangent about how I was a sinner for reading Harry Potter and how I was going to Hell. And she went on and on about this for like an hour, the whole car ride. And I couldn't escape, because I was in a car. So, like my dad had always told me, if you are in like one of those situations with people, where you know you are arguing or you want to, you know, you feel uncomfortable, just leave. But I couldn't, because I was stuck in a car. And she just reamed me out for, it was literally like an hour. And just telling me how Harry Potter was making me a sinner and I was going to go to Hell because I read Harry Potter. And, you know, I was 15, and I had never in my life been confronted like that about Harry Potter, or ever been told that I was going to go to Hell at all. And I was really upset about it, obviously. And I started crying. And she kind of looked at me and said, "I see that you are crying. You should be crying." Like, "You should feel bad." And then continued to keep going. And, it just shocked me that this woman who called herself a Christian would make a 15 year old girl cry and not feel remotely guilty about it. And then proceed to keep doing the thing that was making this kid cry. Um, that was probably one of the worst experiences. Um, luckily I had some friends in the car who were trying to stick up for me or like change the subject. But, she just wasn't having any of that. It pretty much continued until we got back to school, which was not fun for me to say the least. And that was probably the most severe reaction that I got, but a lot of my other friends' parents also didn't let their kids read Harry Potter, which was always something that kind of ticked me off. Because, it's like my favorite book series ever, and I think a lot of good things come from it. And I think there's a lot of good Christian themes and Christian parallels that if these people would just give it a chance to read, you know, I
think they would see that. And you know, that it's not actually promoting witchcraft, or you know, giving anyone negative ideas about Christianity or anything. Um, I had the opportunity to write a couple of papers in defense of Harry Potter, so, those were always fueled by my anger towards those people. [laughter]

**Silence on important issues.** One part of the hidden curriculum at the participants’ Christian schools was silence on issues that students felt needed to be addressed. Megan said, “I think there were some issues that nobody talked about. So that was really interesting.” I asked her what sort of things she was thinking about.

Um, like sex before marriage. That was something that you know like I mean, people were just like, "Ok, whatever." They focused more on gay marriage or on marijuana. So, it was never like, I guess, I don't want to say like the basics of it, but biblically, I mean it says not to. But that was never discussed. That was never an option for discussion. Uh, so I thought that was interesting because I mean like, being at a Christian school, you would think they would teach you like, "This is what the Bible says. Here's why." But it was never discussed. I think there were a couple of other things, I just can't remember but. I just remember kind of sitting back and going, "Ok, so we're not going to talk about this?"

Because, that was church for some kids. They didn't go to church, they didn't do quiet time or anything like that. So whatever they were hearing at school was all they got. They didn't have that discussion at home… Cuz, I felt bad for some of the kids that didn't have the opportunity to hear that. If that makes sense.

The lack of sex education was also disconcerting for Miranda. She came from a public school and felt her peers were at a disadvantage because they did not have the same opportunities as she did.
I had been in public middle school so I had had health class. I had had a very general overview of sex ed when I was in like 5th grade. That was like gender specific, like we were separated boys and girls and they kind of just talked to us very generally. And then we went deeper into sex ed in 6th grade and 8th grade when we had health class. And when I got to [school name], I found out that they don't do that with anyone regardless of age. So, that was shocking and kind of odd because under public school standards, I had been considered one of the very sheltered people. And then I got to [school name] and I was like, oh I know a lot of things that other people here have never even heard of. Um, like we were in Biology in 9th grade starting a very basic reproductive unit, which I think was the first time if you had been in [school name], that was the first experience with any kind of sex ed. And, there was a boy in my class who had never heard the word "vagina". Um, so just the fact that they didn't give any education at all, I mean I get that there's some religious things influencing that, but the fact that you're not going to educate anyone at all about, you know, not even their own bodies. I mean like, they weren't even telling people about their own bodies. And I think that really bothered, it really bothered me! Because I was coming in from a public school where that's just part of the curriculum there. And, yeah, even in the public schools, it's not perfect, but at least they give you something. Um, like, they weren't even, [school name] didn't even teach like, this is what sex is, but use abstinence. They just didn't teach it at all. Which, I think is a huge problem. Because, it's something that regardless of when in life you do it, you need to know some things. And I think that's doing, it's a disservice. And, to send kids out into the world not knowing anything can cause a lot of problems.
Expectations for non-sectarian college Most participants said that their Christian schools attempted to give them an idea of what life might be like as a student in a non-Christian college or university. However, almost all described their actual experiences in a nonsectarian environment as much less confrontational than they were led to believe it would be. Megan recalled how students were led to believe public colleges would be much more anti-Christian than she found hers to be.

We were always taught, "Ok, college is going to be hard. There are going to be professors that are just going to hate you because you are a Christian." Ok, well that's terrifying hearing [laughter] going in, you're just like, "Oh my gosh!" Hearing, like I have a professor who is a Christian, and he openly says, I mean he went to like theology school. So, like seminary. So, he goes, and he kind of talks about church here and there. So, I mean it wasn't like I don't know, it wasn't like as harsh as I thought it was going to be. I'm sure there are some professors out there who are just brutal. But, I think, I don't know, I think [school name] prepared me enough overall.

Even when Blake was in high school, he found descriptions about what college would be like comical. However, he still called the transition a “culture shock.”

Like, you grow up in once culture and you move into another one, there's culture shock. I don't care how much you prepare for moving to India, if you move to India, it's going to be a shock. Maybe not that huge, not that huge, but in the sense that its inevitable and that there definitely was a bit of a shock. Um, I did feel pretty prepared for it on the whole. I felt like, well for one, I was kind of warned to almost sometime laughable extents--"Oh, they're going to make you into a heathen!" [funny voice] I was certainly ready for the fact that it was going to be different.
Garrett also described a “culture shock.” For him, college brought significant differences in faculty’s political ideology and in the socially acceptable norms for student dress.

Even in my senior year at [school name] I was still you know, staunchly agnostic. The, you know, I'll believe what I want to believe. I, I need proof. I need evidence. Um, and ... I, I didn't have any issue until ... well, I never had an issue, but when I got to college it was like a real culture shock. Because, you know, here's [school name], this highly conservative school where I was taught by people like [teacher’s name] who are reactionary on the political spectrum and I go to [university name] in this highly liberal school where ... You know, I'd see people with, like the weirdest haircuts, the weirdest color in their hair. You know, hardly any clothes at all and then ... There's actually a girl in the [campus building] who wears a cape everyday. So seeing things like that and hearing some of the things that I do was kind of like a wait, people are actually like this? It, it was a little bit of a culture shock but I, I kind of got used to it after about a year or so.

1.2 Formal curriculum. Participants also described elements of their schools’ formal curriculum as influences on their identity development. Some spoke about the academic standards of their schools and how that shaped the way they view themselves now. Students encountered religious teaching in Bible and theology classes, but also in science and humanities courses. Conservative political teaching, which seems to have sometimes been inextricably connected to religious teaching, was present in many of the participants’ history and government classes. Chapel services were another element of religious life at participants’ schools about which students seem to have strong feelings.
**Academic standards.** When participants spoke about the academic programs at their respective Christian schools, they often talked about the rigor and lack of rigor they experienced. Undoubtedly, individual Christian schools have varying levels of standards for students. Participants in this study, across groups, expressed some frustration of feeling unprepared for college academically, at least in some areas. Luke described an atmosphere of teachers who let him get away with more than public school teachers did. He seems to be hinting that his perceptions of teachers as unknowledgeable led him to become apathetic.

At the evangelical school, I was not pushed as hard academically. I was a straight A student up until I started attending there. I found it easier to slack off in classes and not all of my teachers seemed as knowledgeable about their studies or about their profession they were teaching to students as others at [public schools].

Megan described how she felt teachers made classes to easy sometimes: “I think the academics were good. There was a few things I would personally change in it. Sometimes, I kind of felt like we got spoon-fed.”

Jenna also felt that her school failed to challenge students. She described making the most of it, though, because she personally has a strong work ethic.

I think a lot of [school name] maybe didn't do the best job of preparing me academically for college. At least for big university and, you know, hard classes and things like that. I wouldn't say [school name] did a very good job of preparing me for that. I think if I didn't have the values that I had or the work ethic that I had as a person just without anyone else's help, just who I am, I would not be doing as well as I am right not. I think it ... I was never really pushed academically. I was pushed but not hard, you know. I don't think [school name] was good about preparing me academically or as just a person who's going
to work hard and do well in school. You know, the values that you should have as a student, I don't think were instilled. They talked about it and it was important and they wanted it to be important but when it came to practicing it, like school, it was ... it was easy to slack off or to get ... to get by with, you know, coming up with some excuse or being a teacher's pet or saying things that made it okay to turn in something late or to, you know, explain why this was this way or whatever, you know, cheating and things like that.

Jenna went on to describe the difficult times some of her high school friends were having because they were not prepared for the higher standards they faced in college.

Miranda felt her school’s math and science program had some problems, but the humanities program really shined. Her school had a senior thesis program that really challenged her. She felt much more prepared for writing requirements in college than public school peers.

Miranda: In a lot of ways they were kind of doing us a disservice. I felt like the math and the science wasn't as strong as a lot of the public schools would have been. When I went into college and was taking like my honor's English classes, I was writing really strong papers. And I had to peer edit a few other papers and it was kind of sad to read. Because it was like these people didn't know how to write a paper. Uh, I actually ended up, for my final English paper my freshman year, I submitted my senior thesis from [school name] and I just cut out all of the Bible stuff. [laughter] And I got like, I got a really high A on it, and then my professor submitted it for a writing award and I ended up winning. So, shout out to [school name] for helping me win an award and like 200 bucks for my senior thesis! [laughter] So, uh, definitely like the humanities stuff, I felt like was really good. Especially for, um, just like a lot of the things you do in college,
like writing papers and like making debates and having to make arguments and think for yourself. Um, I think a lot of my ability to do that came out of [school name].

Blake also felt fairly well prepared for most of his classes, but had to work harder than ever before for some.

It definitely prepared me for college. Um when I went to [college name], a fairly hard school, and yet I didn't feel like I was suddenly thrown into the deep end and just way out of my league. Um I totally felt like it was within my means to do it. At least in terms of like how many hours I was putting into what I was doing. Um some of my classes were shockingly difficult. That was something I've, it was weird when I had a class where I studied for the test for like 5 hours and then got a D on the test. That was that kind of like mental shift of like oh wait what? Like this is possible?

The level of rigor at participants’ schools seems to have played some role in their identity development. Luke saw a lack of rigor as contributing to apathy. For Jenna, the same unchallenging nature seems to have helped her see herself as an independent worker. She was not satisfied to meet the same low standards to which her peers aspired. The demands of Miranda’s school’s writing program seem to of led her to see herself as a competent thinker and writer. Blake’s high school program seems to have left him feeling competent to succeed, even though he still had to adjust to a new category of high standards.

Religion in classes. All of the study’s participants recalled religion being a major component of their coursework. Unsurprisingly, Bible and theology classes contained religious content. Participants also described how teachers presented religious beliefs, specifically Young Earth Creationism, in their science courses. They also remembered religious doctrine being integrated into humanities classes.
Bible. Participants reported that most of the religious teaching in their schools were a part of Bible and theology classes. Jenna talked about the full sequence of high school Bible classes. Um, my freshman year was ... We focused on John. And so that was really just straight Bible class. Like what people who don't go to private schools would think Bible class would be. You know, like, studying the Bible and reading it and taking quizzes and memorizing verses and think that's what the cliché idea of a Bible class would look like for people who didn't go to private school. But then my sophomore and junior and senior year we kind of got into, you know, we ... first we got into other religions and so we were able to learn about different religions and denominations and what they believed in. So those were cool things to learn because I didn't really know much about those, you know.

And so it ... and it really ... not only just prepared me but like I said, validated my relationship with God because it just ... when you ... when you study, you know, Christianity and you learn how to defend it ... it just ... it helps your relationship. You know, you have to have faith. And that's ... that is what your relationship with God is but being able to study those things and talk about them helps your faith. You know, it helps you not doubt so much because you're like, I know this is true because we learned it in Bible class and there's these facts and there's these things. And so that was a cool class. Miranda, looking back, noticed that all of what she learned about other religions was from the perspective of her Christian teachers.

Um, I think we touched on some of the other religions, um, in some of our more uh, religious focused classes. I think in like maybe CWV [Christian Worldview] and apologetics, or maybe it was history, we learned about Judaism and Buddhism and things
like that. But only very generally, and not really from the perspectives of a person who
was a member of that group.

While she remembered being content with what she was learning in high school, Miranda seems
to now feel some of the religion classes she took inadequately prepared her to defend her faith.

Um, but we had, and then in senior year, we had Apologetics, which was in theory, supposed to help us defend our faith, but I feel like I didn't really learn how to do that because I went to college and people, I met a lot of people who were atheists who tried to have these conversations with me, and I was kind of at a loss for how to respond. And I feel like the point of Apologetics was to prepare us for that and I feel like I didn't really get anything out of it because I then wasn't able to do that when I actually had to in real life. I think it just didn't answer a lot of the questions that realistically people were going to ask.

Megan expressed some of the same frustration of not getting a lot from her classes on world
religions.

It was kind of like, you know, well here's Islam. Here's your facts. You know, powerpoint, and it got kind of boring. Like, I like taking notes, that doesn't bother me, but, people would take notes on their iPad, and like swipe and play games. So, I mean, it kind of just became a blow off class… It was kind of like fascinating to kind of like think through it in the moment, but being in college now, it’s kind of like that doesn't help me at all.

Science. Religion also seems to have played an important role in the science courses
participants took. Miranda remembered her classes presenting multiple views on Creationism.
However, she described how teachers presented Young Earth Creationism (YEC) as “what the Bible says,” which seems to link YEC to proper religious belief.

I think it kind of got mentioned, like, "here's what some people believe, and then, like you know, this is what you know us as Christians, you know what the Bible says". It was just kind of like stated. Here's what some people believe and why. So that was interesting, getting to see the other side of it. I mean at most private [Christian] schools, you kind of just grow up with it, like, going, okay, on day 1, God created this, and so instead of hearing that constantly, it was like, "here's this." I thought that was awesome. I loved getting to hear, I like hearing both sides.

Haley remembered a similar experience of learning about evolution, even though it was presented by her teachers as false.

But um, now, you know, I'm like oh, good like, and I think, I think when she acknowledged the fact that like, these are other theories out there, like Darwinism and evolution and all that, but like, this is ours. And I think it helps you even like form arguments and like, kind of to know what you're dealing with when you go out into like university and um, so that was, always helpful.

Blake, who now rejects YEC, also recalled learning about scientific topics that his teacher did not necessarily believe were true.

Like, you know, I take a class on biology and we're learning about evolution. And of course, didn't learn as much about evolution in [school name], but I learned a little bit, and it was enough to keep up [in college] pretty easily. I never really felt like there was particularly large gaps in my education. Um, in terms of kind of secular topics.
Jenna remembered her school’s science program avoiding topics like evolution. She talked about the Christian “bubble” she experienced.

That was the hardest part because [school name] did a great job of teaching us and, you know, there's lots of secular things out there and, you know, science, they kept it very, you know, Christian. And tried to stay away from, you know, evolution and those kinds of things.

Jenna, along with most of the participants, recalled a distinction made between biological evolution and correct Christian belief.

Luke remembered feeling pressure to conform to his school’s particular brand of YEC—that God created relatively recently, but made it look like it was already much older.

We had to believe that God had created the Earth as it is now. Man, and woman, as we are and everything, that there was no evolution in the process. That He created a full grown Earth. Not necessarily as some people believe that the Earth started as one point, and that as it grew, developed over billions and trillions of years, we believe, it was taught, that He made it already aged, essentially.

It seems that for Luke, and many other participants, YEC was a standard part of both the hidden and formal curricula. It was presented as both religious and scientific fact.

*Humanities.* Classes on the humanities were another place religious seems to have been deeply integrated into the curricula participants experienced. As Blake put it, “Definitely all of our humanities classes, were very religion heavy, or at least influenced a lot by religion.” Megan recalls starting English classes with Bible readings.
In English, we read the Bible every morning. Um, it was my first class of the day, so that was kind of how we started off the day. Which was really cool, and then we did like prayer requests, and all of that.

Blake was slightly critical when a teachers tried to incorporate the Bible into material where he did not feel it fit.

Admittedly, there was always that, uh, slant to everything. They always tried to incorporate some kind of biblical worldview into everything. Into most classes, which was good when it made sense and annoying when it was shoehorned in.

He recalled his senior thesis program. For thesis, students took a full year to research and write a thesis that they defended in the last few weeks of school. Passing the class and defense was a graduation requirement at his school.

Um, I know in my senior thesis, we had to have like a whole section, like two or three pages long that was just biblical support for whatever your thesis was. Which was kind of funny, because people were writing about things like, you know, genetically modified foods, or like nuclear weapons. So, it's like where? [laughter] I don't know where they found biblical support for that. Like, kudos to them for even being able to bullshit that [laughter] Um, so yeah, it was definitely kind of integrated into a lot of the things that we did.

I followed up by asking what example he used for integration of ballistic missiles with the Bible. His response suggested frustration at having to incorporate biblical teaching when he did not feel it was appropriate or made sense.

Yeah, the irony was that it was horrible. Almost every passage you look up in the Bible about building up defenses is God talking about how defenses are worthless! [laughter]
Biblically, there is almost no support for what I believed! I eventually settled on, oh, it's that story, that parable about, it's like the women with the candles, lamps, or something like that. Now I can't even remember it. It in some ways, sort of talks about like planning ahead and being ready for the future. Um, which even that, was really pushing it. The passage is really about salvation, it has nothing to do with it. But, uh, that's what I used. In fact, it was so bad that I remember, I'll never forget, man! The thing I really remember is that in my defense section, I think it was [individual's name] said, like, started talking about, was like, "I'm not sure this is a very good justification for it." And I was prepared to defend it, but I opened with, "well, I think this isn't a particularly good passage, I sort of shoehorned it in, but..." And then she literally stopped me, and was just like, "That's ok, that's all I really wanted to hear you say. " I was like, "I'm ready to defend it." She was like, "No, no, that's fine, that's enough." I was like, wow. Even you guys know this is stupid. Why are we doing this?

Garrett recollected a freshman level ancient history class. He seemed resentful, not only that it began with the creation story of Genesis, but that his teacher presented the Young Earth Creationist account as “absolute truth.”

But, but I definitely remember, ninth grade history, I had a huge problem with that class because it wasn't world history. It was Christian history and they taught us antiquity from a Christian point of view starting with, you know, the creation of the world and I'm going ... this isn't proven history. Why, why are we learning this? I was extremely bitter. But I, I had the greatest problem with the fact that she was saying this is how it is not this is one of many theories of what happened, you know, back in five thousand BC to zero
AD. It, it was a this is the way it is and you're going to be tested on this as though it were absolute truth (chuckles) and I, I had a huge issue with that.

**Politics in classes.** Politics were a part of the hidden curriculum. Earlier, in the section of room for belief non-conformity, participants described feeling unable to question or disagree with teachers’ strong conservative beliefs. Miranda described the formal curriculum for her government and history class as “biased,” but said that she did not realize it at the time.

Oh, my senior year, no junior year, my junior year Civics class was taught by a conservative Christian Republican [laughter] And so were basically taught about American government from the perspective of a conservative Christian Republican. So obviously, that means that what we were taught was very biased. And a lot of us didn't know it at the time. Because, you kind of just assume that what you are being taught in school is the truth. And you know, you would expect that in school you are getting, you know, all of the sides that you need to go out into the world and make informed decisions. But, we learned government and then history the next year from [the same teacher], and all of that was taught to use, you know, from that conservative Christian Republican perspective. And, I know, looking back at my own views at the time, it made me very biased. And I didn't know I was biased at the time. I thought that I was just learning what I was being taught. And that that was the right thing.

Haley said that her teacher explicitly endorsed Mr. Romney for president in class. She remembered watching videos in class that showed “how bad” President Obama was.

Um, I think [teacher name] influenced me a lot. Especially because it was an election year when we took our class. [The teacher] very opinionated... It was Obama and Romney. Yeah. So that was high school. Um, so I really like, don't care, like I'm very, I
don't know if this is what like exactly libertarians believe, but from the libertarian view I got from [teacher name], it's like y'all can do whatever you want as long as you're not like invading other people's liberties and like, their God-given rights or rights by the state. You know, and I think like, I don't really think we need like a huge central government. Haley’s teacher seems to have made a lasting impact her political beliefs.

I asked Jenna how religion was integrated into her classes. She did not bring up any specifics, but it seems that for her, right political beliefs were related to right religious beliefs. My freshman and sophomore year I didn't really get any kind of [religious] integration very well. I don't know if it was just my teachers didn't do as good of a job but eventually my junior and senior year we got a new teacher. Um, it got a lot better. And we were able to incorporate, you know, views on Christianity and, you know, talk more about those, you know, Christian ideas and beliefs. And talk more about politics and defining your beliefs as a Christian and, you know, what you're led to believe in politics and in views and ... and in past history and mistakes that we've made as a country.

**Chapel.** All of the participants brought up their schools’ chapel programs when they talked about their spiritual life in high school. Most described some level of ambivalence towards chapel. They seemed to enjoy it at times, but also really detest it at others. Garrett enjoyed the parts of chapel that challenged him intellectually.

You know, and just sitting there for I forget how long ... was horrible. But then once we got into you know, the more theoretical parts of the Bible, the more theoretical parts of Christianity, then I became, you know, really interested.

For Miranda, chapel quickly became part of the Christian school routine.
Um, well we liked it because it made our classes shorter those days! [laughter] Um, I guess it was kind of like a church service I guess. We had a pastor usually who would come and talk to us. And we usually had to sing a hymn or two. Um, and pray together. Um, that was pretty much it really. Um, it was just part of our, it was just part of our week. I don't think any of us really thought too much of it. Sometimes we liked it, sometimes we didn't.

Megan recalled chapel losing its excitement by the time she became a senior.

It was, at certain times it was, but by the end of it, okay, senior year, thinks kind of just, you know, I don't want to say it didn't matter, but I think, by the end of it, it became just such a routine. Especially for the kids who'd been there since kindergarten or 1st grade. It became such a routine. We go to chapel this day. There were sometimes it was awesome, and I remember certain situations… It was pretty much you knew what you were walking into. So, it got a little boring after a while. There was never something that was like "oh, cool!" You know, "I'm so excited!" It was kind of just like "going to chapel...." [laughter] Jenna also described chapel becoming less exciting as she got closer to graduation. She seems to have placed more responsibility on herself to make the most of the experience, though.

Well, at first, it was really ... at first it was awesome because it was so new to me and it was like, you know, every once a week we went to Chapel and you did a Bible class and things like that. So all of that was really awesome to me but as the years went on I had to ... I had to really make a conscious effort to not get into this rut. Or to take it for granted, you know. Of being in Chapel every day because, you know, it gets annoying or because it's, you know, not as good or you're tired. You don't want to hear it, you know.
Jenna was the only participant that said they had an active role in a chapel service. Her story suggests speaking in chapel was an important experience for Jenna.

I spoke once. I ... uh ... had a ... a difficult experience in my life and eventually I ... you know, just praying about it and was just like, what does this mean? What is ... God, what do you want me to do with this? You know, happened to me and I went through this and He just laid this burden on me that I had to speak and I've never really been that way. I'm an outgoing person but I don't like speaking in front of people and I don't like ... especially about Christianity because I was ... I was, you know, confident in my relationship with God and I knew it was important and I knew it was a good one but I wasn't confident about speaking about it, you know. Or speaking about the Bible and things like that because I didn't feel like I was qualified or that I didn't know enough.

But, you know, He laid it on my heart and so when He does ... when He tells you to do something, you know, you do it. And when you do, it's a great thing. And it's exactly where He wants you to be. You know, I was scared and ... but afterwards I felt so great because I'd done something that He wanted me to do. And because I was following Him, He ... He led me to ... to do it and I did it well, you know, because I was trusting in Him and because I said, "Okay, I'm going to be faithful and I'm going to speak because you asked me to." And so, like everybody says, you know, He was there. He put ... spoke to my ... spoke and put things on my heart that He wanted me to say and it ... it turned out to be a great thing. I'm glad I did it. I was scared and I felt unprepared. I don't think I ever could have felt prepared to speak but it was ... it was a really good thing. I would love to do it again, to go back and talk because I ... It was really fun.

Luke talked about chapel in more negative terms than other participants.
I would remember either our Bible teacher or the headmaster getting up there on most occasions giving just some really cookie-cutter sermon that they probably got out of the book or off online out of some chat forum for preachers. [laughter] And then, a student-led band would play worship music and honestly, it wasn't always too serious. Some people, there were days "UGH, I just don't want to go to chapel. I hate chapel so much. This is a waste of time. We could go be doing other things right now." Or, if sports teams got to miss chapel because they had a game that day, they were kind of ecstatic, like "YEAH!, I don't have to go. I don't have to sit through that." Then there were other days that were student-led sermons. And some of the students that they would talk, I feel were very adamant about certain, issues, and every time they spoke, they would address the same issue. And sometimes, I don't know, I felt more like it was for them. I feel like it was like, some students got put on just because they were favorite students, but, it's just kinda how it works.

It seems that for most participants, chapel was a positive experience at least some of the time. Everyone also spoke of it as being boring, a rut, and tiring.

1.3 Peers. Participants viewed peers as another strong influencer on their religious identity development. Friends motivated some participants to become more involved in religion and to become a part of new denominations. Seeing friends become less interested in faith affected the way some participants saw themselves. A few participants recalled different groups of students that were defined by the degree to which they upheld their schools’ behavior expectations.

Friends. The friendships participants developed in their Christian high schools seems to have strongly impacted their religious identity development.
I hadn't really had friends before that I could confide in and like question my faith and just talk about my beliefs with. And so it was kind of cool that like anytime I was struggling or having a hard time or just needed someone to talk to, I could pretty much depend on most of my friends to like be like, "I'll pray for you" or "Let me pray for you", which was a really cool thing that can definitely bring people together. And I think that makes those friendships a lot more special than the friendships that I had outside of, um, school or my faith. Because, I think doing those kinds of things just brings you closer together. So, it was really cool to make those kinds of friends, who you know, you kind of depend on and support each other through your faith. So, that was cool as well.

And, I think being around them also kind of made me want to be a better person. Because, a lot of them were really good models I think for me. Of how better people, I guess, were living. I wasn't a very good person, or at least I didn't feel like I was a very good person when I was a teenager. And I think being around people like that made me strive to be a better person in my everyday life, I guess. So yeah, definitely the people I was around were really, really good for me at that time of my life.

At another point in the interview, Miranda talked about how the influence of religion became much more important in her life, mostly because of the influence of friends at her school.

Um, for me personally, it had never been a big deal until I went to [school name]. And, then I started to see people for whom it was a really big deal. And it was kind of emphasized that it should be a big deal. And, I felt like anyone who didn't think that way, anyone who wasn't you know, all about God all of the time was kind of looked down upon by a lot of the people. Um, and I kind of felt like I would be judged if I acted like it wasn't important. Um, not to say it isn't, just up 'til that point in my life it hadn't been that
big of a deal. And then all of the sudden, I was around all of these people who were just basically influencing me to be like that all of the time. Um, and I think the more time I spent there, the bigger deal it came to be.

Luke, who grew up in a Pentecostal church, described feeling pressure from his friends to conform to a denomination with wider representation at his school.

The conversion experience that I feel like had was converting from Pentecostal to just identifying as just a non-denominational Christian, more or less. I was greatly influenced to drop my Pentecostal viewpoint. It was joked about a lot, just about aspects of modesty. That was a big deal. It was just constantly joked about that I had to wear pants about all the time. I would make jokes about it. It's also a thing that I questioned back and forth, and the Pentecostal affiliation itself, and at this school, I was greatly influenced to push against that. You know, go against the grain there. And I did. It helped me come along a little bit more. Then, when I honestly stopped identifying as a Pentecostal, I was kind of approved of by people. They were like, you know, "Nice! Like, you're not tied down anymore or whatever to that."

Haley also changed affiliations from Catholicism to a mainline protestant denomination. The change was largely the result of a friend’s influence at the evangelical school she attended.

She [Haley’s friend] invited me on the missions trip, and I went, and I had a great time, and and then, some of the church was like, "Come to church" and I was like, "Okay."
And I showed up, and that's like ... It's weird because like I went to this Christian school for two years, and I didn't like it. I hated it, but I started going to [church name] and that's what made me a Christian. Like, that experience changed me rather than the school which was, I thought kind of ironic.
Changing friends. A couple of participants related how they perceived changes in their friends through high school, too. Seeing their friends change seems to have impacted them. Megan described feeling like she was staying true to her religion while some of her friends slipped away. It seems like the experience led her to feel more grounded in what she believed.

Um, a lot of my close friends that I started off with back in 7th grade. There was a group of us and we were all super close. We were like, I mean, pretty on fire for God back in 7th grade. As we got older, a majority of that group got into theater, and that has its own stuff with it. You know, what they're okay with on stage, what they're okay with doing. Some of their close friends. And then there's the other group that got into more of the partying, got into more of the drugs and alcohol and all of that. So, that kind of you know, my close friends started going totally different ways than I did. I guess just trying to stay true to who I was while all of my friends were doing that was insane. You know, I grew up in church and was super involved in church. So, I was like, "yeah, I got this." And then, they'd be like, "Hey, we're going to this party" or "Hey, my friends, you know they're over here like making out and they're gay". And I'm like, "Ok, I'm not used to any of that".

Gradually losing contact with a friend seems to have had a similar impact on Jenna. Faith was really important to her and most of her friends, but she remembered when one of her friends lost interest.

He didn't like that anymore so I feel like he got bored or got uninterested in being our friend. And so, he went out in search of new friends. And he found friends that were like him. And then from that point on, he started hanging out with them and more and more
just kept, you know, distancing himself from us because we just weren't what he wanted anymore. We weren't the type of friend that he wanted to have.

And so, that pushed him away from us. And then ... not talking to us, not being around us, changed his view of us. So he started getting this, you know, very non-Christian view like hypocritical ... like they're hypocrites, they're judging me, they, you know, they don't like what I do and they hate me and, you know. Just this total opposite view of us and what the kind of relationship we had. It just changed so quickly because he started hanging out with the wrong kind of people. Or at least the people that he shouldn't have hung out with and so then he started things he shouldn't have and it just, you know, it just, you know, snowballed from there.

It seems like the experience may have affected the way Jenna defined social groups in her school. She and most of her friends formed a group for which faith was important. She saw the friend who she perceived as losing interest in that group, though, as different and less Christian.

**Different groups and hiding identity.** Luke and Megan both brought up the idea that at least some students had to hide aspects of their identity from peers. They described different groups of students. Membership in the groups seems to be based on the perceived genuineness of an individual’s faith. Luke described the groups.

There were some who were actively Christians, but they liked to go party and have fun, do whatever outside of school. They liked to keep their social life outside, they tried to keep that uninvolved with school. They tried, everyone was always scared about what would get out because it was a small school, so if you told the wrong person something, everyone is going to know in the next two or three days.

I asked Luke to describe the group he saw himself as being a part of.
That's sort of a difficult one. It's not cut and dry. I would say I was definitely on the line. I was back and forth between the two. I started off going in definitely as the.. I bought in. 100%. I was gung-ho for it. It slowly just, I don't know, broke down. It took a little bit at a time. I was kind of on the edge, and I myself would go out. I would have a social life outside of school I didn't want people to know about, especially others that really bought into it.

Megan observed that for those who wanted to keep secrets, life could get complicated. I think it became a lot of like a hiding game. They were kind of trying to hide who they were. Which, I think made it worse. You know, they didn't really have the openness, and kind of be like, okay, here's what I'm dealing with.. I think they thought they couldn't trust people. Like, certain teachers or administration to be like, "I need help. Can you talk to me about this ?" Because if it was anything the school was bad, then they would get in trouble, and if they didn't go to church, who else was going to help them?

Megan also recounted how it was sometimes hard for her to know which group she even wanted to be a part of.

You know, and then, by the end of it, you could either hang out with like the kids that are super Christian, and you could either hang out with them, and they would be super mean to you. Or, you'd go hang out with the bad kids, quote un-quote, and they would be super friendly, and you'd be like, "yeah, this is great!" Well, it wasn't like the good Christian group, it was just the kids that like, all the teachers are like, "you're just so great.." Like, they were horrible. And I guess, it could have just been my personal experiences, too, with them, that changed how I viewed them. And they got put into leadership for certain
things and I was like, "ok, great.." You know, it was like, there's one more thing that
you're in charge of, and I don't think you should be in charge of that.

She recounted how even her peers she thought of as the “bad kids” maintained appearances of
faith at school.

They would go party on the weekend constantly. And what I mean by party, I mean 5 of
the would get together and they would drink and smoke pot, and do whatever...[laughter]
else they wanted. They'd come back, and in Bible class, they would be like, "yeah, here's
this!" and they'd be like, I don't want to say, they weren't faking it, they were just being
very hypocritical. Because, they'd be like, "people shouldn't do this and this and this," but
yet, what they'd do on the weekends would be like a completely different story. Or what
they were doing when they got home or the minute they drove off campus. And so I
think, that was kind of just like, when it's your close friends, you know everything. And
so, seeing how they were in Bible class, I was like, [laughter] okay, that's not what you're
doing. That's not how you're living. I mean, it was just kind of sad watching that. I think
they tried to put on the I'm a good, good Christian kid mask. I think everyone kind of saw
through it. A few of them, a few of them, you couldn't tell until you got to know them.

For Megan and Luke both, hiding and seeing others hide seems to have been important in
religious identity development. It seems Luke began to see himself as more and more of an
outsider, having to maintain appearances for those who “bought into” the expectations of the
school. For Megan, though, not having something to hide became part of how she saw her
religious identity. She seemed resentful of students she felt were mean to her who put on the
appearance of being a “good Christian” and gained leadership positions.
Jenna identified her faith as integral to her high school experience. I asked her if she felt most of her peers would also feel faith was such an important part of their experience.

Um, I would say half and half. Maybe. Maybe 60/40 actually. I think like 40% of them did care and appreciate but throughout the years, as the years went on, it just continued to lessen. You know, like I said before, just with this, you know, ingratitude or, you know, this attitude towards, we do this all the time and so this idea of not wanting to do it anymore, you know, sounds like a good idea. And so I think a lot of my peers developed that and they didn't recognize what that was and so it got the best of them. So I believe that they, you know, kind of push it away or had this, you know, bitter attitude towards it. But I would say, you know, most of the people that I hung around or that were in my class really did appreciate it. And the ones that did, they ... they really did. It was very genuine, you know.

Jenna, Megan, and Luke all appeared to understand their own identity and Other in terms of the genuineness of faith.

2. Influences on Identity Development in College

Participants also identified influences on their identity development that they encountered after transitioning into college. Of these, strong influences included interactions with Others, decreased religiosity, and church and mission trips. In each category, multiple themes emerged.

2.1 Interactions with Others. While discussing ways they have changed since going to college, all participants told stories about people they met who broadened their outlooks. These interactions seem to have been stronger influences than coursework, professors, or any other entity for most participants. Miranda described an openness to engage people with different religious beliefs that led to personal growth.
I just remember being up really late a couple of nights with one of my really good friends, just having these really in-depth conversations with him about, you know, what I believed as a Christian and what his response to that was as an atheist. And I felt like that was a really good kind of place for me to explore kind of what I personally believed, rather than what you know my school or my church or my parents told me to believe. And really figuring out how to kind of express what I thought and defend what I thought and respond to other peoples' critiques and criticisms of those things. I don't specifically remember much of what we talked about, but I remember coming out of those thinking like, wow, that was a really good conversation and I'm glad that we can have those talks. And that's something that I never really got to do at [school name] because you know, everyone was a Christian. So you never got that kind of outside perspective, or those people challenging you. And so, I enjoyed college because I met a lot of people who challenged my beliefs. And that was, I think, a good thing for me to explore.

Miranda was excited for the opportunity to connect with people from other religions. She told about the experience of attending religious services with her roommate as a first-year student.

Well, my roommate freshman year was Jewish. So, that was kind of just really interesting. She, she had grown up Jewish and I'd grown up Christian. Um, both of us were still practicing our religions, and we had, um, not too many really deep conversations, but it just came up in conversation a lot. And I learned a lot about the kinds of things she believed and the kinds of things she did as like a practicing Jew. And actually, she asked me, I think, I don't remember if it was Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, but like a month into our freshman year, she was like, you know I think I really should go to temple for this Jewish holiday, but I don't want to go alone. Do you want to
go with me? And I was like, oh my gosh, that sounds really cool. I would love to go with you to a temple and see kind of what it's like, to see how Jews worship. Which was a pretty cool experience for me. Um, because I'd never been to a temple before, and, um, it honestly didn't seem too different from the kinds of things that I'd expect from a Christian church. They, you know, they were worshiping God, they had all of their different prayers and songs, and things. I just thought it was a really cool thing to do. And I was really open to that, and I was really honored that she felt comfortable enough around me, even though she knew I was a Christian, to ask if I wanted to go to temple with her. So that was a really cool experience.

Having a first-year roommate with a different religious background led to new experiences for Jenna as well. She recounted attending a Catholic mass for the first time.

It was like nothing I'd ever been before. I've only ever been to Baptist, and then, I went from being a Baptist, you know I still consider myself a Baptist, but I go to a non-denominational church, you know, and so I've never really had this religion shock, of just a totally different religion. I'm not really big on religion, because I think it's a relationship, not a religion, but it was really weird. It was just very different, I was definitely not in my element, I was, I was, I mean, it was cool, but, I didn't connect like I would if I was at a non-denominational or a Baptist church. I mean, I tried. I really tried to pay attention, and see what they do and appreciate it, but I was just, it was one of the weirdest things I've ever been to, just because I'd never done that in my 18-years of life, I'd always been to the same type of service, you know?

Where we do the same thing, then there's this, where it's totally you know, there's a routine, they do these different things, and they read out of this book, and it's just like you
know, totally go through it, and it was just totally foreign to me. It was a cool experience, I'm glad I did it, I'm glad I didn't let her going to a Catholic church stop me from going at all, but it was definitely something, I don't think I'll ever forget, because it was strange.

(laughter) For me.

Jenna described the experiences as being incredibly foreign. I asked her if she felt her roommate was a Christian.

Yeah. I mean, it's we, kind of we talk about it sometimes, but you know, it's just totally different thing. Just being there, and what they value. I don't know we kind of are just very different in that sense. I know, she believes in God, I mean the things like that. But, it's just different. So, that's just hard to grasp, because I've never had a friend who's been a different religion than me, you know that's so different. You know, like, yes, Baptist, or you know, like non-denominational, things like that, like those differences. But like being you know, non-denominational to a Catholic, you know, that's a huge difference, and so.

It's been difficult to understand like you know, where she comes from, and what she believes in and then what I believe. It's really cool, and it's helped me grow as a believer, but it's been weird. It's hard to understand people's mindsets just based on a religion, you know, maybe not just based solely on a relationship.

When Blake when to college, he said he generally thought of non-religious people as leading incomplete lives. It was a surprise for him to find agnostic acquaintances did not seem to feel like they were missing out in the ways he assumed they would.

Um, uh, I think especially for me, it's compelling when I meet really intelligent, really insightful people who are not religious. Um, people who think very deeply about the
world, who live very fulfilling lives, yet who are not a Christian. Um, that was definitely something to challenge me.

He described some struggle understanding how peers who did not adhere to the same behavior norms he subscribed to seemed to be good people.

Um, there are, you know, I didn't have, you know, like, you know, I think some people get kind of like caught up in social pressures and stuff where you just all of the sudden have a lot of friends who aren't Christians. Which definitely did happen for me. And they act in very different ways, and your kind of have to resolve in your mind that like, oh, I can be friends with people who are totally not Christians. And they are also good people. And they also seem to do things that Christianity does not approve of, and yet don't seem terribly harmful to them. Um, so that was, you know, something to work through. But I felt like I was pretty good with that.

Even though Luke considered himself a “pretty accepting person,” he recalled meeting a transgender person for the first time as an important experience.

I was fortunate enough my first year to take Human Sexuality class with a professor who you know really helped me be more comfortable and understanding of that. I already viewed myself as a pretty accepting person, identifying as a bisexual. I obviously didn't have any issues with people being gay. That wasn't an issue with me. But, meeting someone who was transgender for the first time was kind of like "Whoa!"

He went on to say being an ally for transgender people was much more important to him, now.

2.2 Decreased religiosity. Young adults, as a group, become less religious during their college-aged years (Regnerus et al., 2007). The trend held among participants in this study. These declines in religiosity appears to influence how at least some of the participant began to
see themselves. Luke described feeling like he needed some distance from church when he began college.

At the school, after attending there for three years, after I stopped going to an evangelical Christian school, I did not continue going to church outside. I still identify as a Christian, but was not attending any structure or building to have service or fellowship. Uh, I just kinda felt burnt out. Being, just constantly being, church just being shoved down your throat every day. It wasn't bad, but, I feel that after that, I just needed some space to just get a way and really think about what I believed. There were some doubts at times, I wasn't sure that there was a god. But, I can say that I firmly believe that there is a god and I do identify as a Christian.

Luke went on to say that he will occasionally go with his parents for holidays, but he does not like the feelings of judgement he receives there.

Miranda attended her home church on weekends away from college and during the summer. While she was at school, she did not attend services regularly, though.

In the sense of me being I guess practicing like weekly or daily, I wasn't doing as much in college. But, I didn't feel like it was making me a lesser Christian. Um, I still felt pretty strong in my faith. I was still connected to a lot of the people in my church family from home. So, I would still go home and go to church. I was still in contact with a lot of the people in my youth group… When you're at a secular college to be doing that I guess weekly, going to church thing [laughter] for lack of a better word. Um, and a lot of times, I just couldn't. Because you're in college, you're doing a lot of things on the weekends, and not even necessarily the drinking and partying things.
Jenna, a first-year student, seems to still be struggling with a balance between personal spirituality and religiosity.

So, I think just constantly trying to live that out has been what's been most important about being a Christian for me right now, I mean, in my life. And obviously, you know, trying to be better about going to church, and doing the practices and things that make you a better Christian, and help you grow, but I think just keeping my personal relationship with him, and then letting that shine outward. You know, when I go to class or when I go do things, and when I talk to people and things like that. So, that's really been the focus. Which, it hasn't always been that way, I mean, that's always been an important thing, but it's never been like the focus. It kind of changed since I've been in college, just because I've struggled with going to church, and reading my Bible, and you know. Doing worship, and praying, and things like that that aren't as easy to do on your own, when you aren't required to do them.

She was the only participant to describe feelings of guilt for not attending religious services or taking part in spiritual disciplines as much as she once did.

You start to feel guilty, if you don't go to church or you haven't attended, so you try to do better in other areas. Not that it's going to make it better or okay that you're not going to church. You know, but just trying to be better in different aspects because I'm not being good in other areas.

So, you know, church is still important, and I know it's important, and I'm saying that's something I want to do better about, but, you know. Since I'm not being better about that, and I am struggling with that, I always continue to try to do everything else really well, too. Because, it's hard to not go to church. It's been difficult, it's just frustrating, you
know? Because when you try the first church and you don't like it, and you're like "oh my
gosh, you know, are they ever going to compare to my church at home?" But, that's not
an excuse.

Blake articulated personal disappointment with the religious services he attended more
than other participants. He receives compensation by going to services—he works at a church as
a musician. He said that he appreciates more intellectually stimulating sermons than he normally
hears.

That's, that's probably the biggest thing I found it's slowly gotten harder and harder to
enjoy church services. That could be for a number of reasons. It's probably partly because
of that what I was talking about before that, just like hard, more difficulty feeling
connected. Um I also just find sermons even more bland (laughs). Um I think that might
partly be because I've, I've started um, I've increasingly like when I was thinking about
religion at school, it was often times in this very kind of rigorous academic way. Um and
now I'm just sort of used to that and it's just kind of what I want. Which I probably
shouldn't. I feel like sermons are probably a good thing, and it's probably good to not
always have these discussions be super rigorous and analytical.

Um so I find myself zoning out in services. I mean that's always been a problem, I
think everybody has that you know, you zone out during sermons occasionally. But uh
that's become like more often than not I almost don't even listen to the sermon. I think it
doesn't help that now I'm uh singing uh as a job at a church. Um it's a, it's another
Presbyterian church that's nearby. I like it, it's a nice church. But, that also makes it
harder to feel connected to it, like I just don't feel connected to that congregation at all.
Because I know I'm leaving them in like a couple months. Um I have just no investment
in that church whatsoever. I don't really care about it. Um so I think that definitely makes it harder compared to back in the day when I was going to [congregation name], which is this church I had been going to since I could form memories. Um and just had a super deep connection and attachment to it and all the people that were there. Um and felt much more compelled to be apart of things at that church. So yeah that's definitely been a bummer.

Megan was very involved in her church through high school.

I guess, outside of school, I was super involved in my church. I had been there since 4th grade, and so, by the time I hit high school, I was going on mission trips every summer with my church. I was leading different things. I ended up becoming a junior high leader my senior year. So, I was super involved with my church. Super involved with all of that.

She has participated less since beginning college, though.

I try to go at least once every two weeks. Sometimes school work or something will pop up. It gets crazy. I do try to watch it online if I can. And I watch it through the week if I don't get opportunity to go. But it comes down to I go maybe twice a month. But yea, that doesn't, I go sometimes to like the small groups. It just really depends on the week and the month that I'm in.

It seems that, for most participants, college was a time of attending church less. With the exception of Garrett, all participants described themselves throughout interviews as being spiritual. Jenna spoke at length of the importance of her “relationship.” Attending religious services regularly while at college did not appear to be important to participants, though.

Six of the seven participants regularly attend church services with parents when they are not at college. It seems context may be influencing participants’ sense of self. At college, the
“college student” dimension of identity becomes more central than the “religious” dimension. Students do not seem to be less spiritual at college, however.

2.3 Church and mission trips. Even though most participants attended church less while in college, the influence of churches was still important to a few. Megan, Miranda, and Haley described going on mission trips sponsored by their home churches, as keeping them, as Miranda put it, “grounded in my faith.”

Church. Most participants became less religious, but church was an important part of the college experience for Haley and Garrett—albeit for different reasons. Haley, a first-year student, lived close enough to home that she was able to keep attending the same church she went to through high school. She described being quite active there.

Um, I'm very religious. I go to church at least twice a week but not like for church, but I'm like involved in a lot of stuff at church, so um, I'm there a lot. Um, I teach Sunday school. Second and third grade. Then we have like church and I'm either in church or downstairs helping out with junior church which is when like the kids go down. Um, then we have play practice and I'm there for like four hours on Sundays. And then I'm back again on Wednesdays for play practice and then I help out in the pre-k on Wednesdays or Fridays or both, um at church.

She also described feeling pressure from her church to do more.

So I'm very religious. Love Jesus. Hallelujah. Um, I don't know, that's like with, I love church and I love Jesus but I hate that like church for me is more about the activities I do in church. Like, I don't really feel like I'm there for Jesus as much as I am ... But that's kind of personal, like, I mean not that like, it's not ... That's like more my own personal like thing. Not necessarily like, my general religious life. But yeah so I'm in church a lot
and I do a lot of things and they think I should be a pastor. I'm like, "Nah, you don't, you don't know my life," like I would be an awful pastor.

Um, yeah, church, I feel like they kind of hold me up on this pedestal a little bit. Like, I can do no wrong, and if there's a job that needs to be done, I'm the one who does it. Which is fine. And like I love it there and I love everyone I go to church with. Um, but yeah. Like one time they asked me to sing “Oh, Holy Night” on Christmas eve and I was like, "Have you ever heard me sing?" Like I think they just assumed I could do it because I do a lot of things. Which is fine. I didn't do it because I can't sing. Well actually, I don't know, I'm like an okay singer but then I googled Carrie Underwood singing it and I was like, "Oh, no, sorry [individual’s name]. I can't do that."

It seems like Haley’s relationship with her home church is an important part of how she views her religious self.

Garrett attends services regularly as a church musician. He described an appreciation for sacred music, even though he does not consider himself to be a Christian.

I, I have stopped seeing the, the church as a, a, religion, and I've started seeing it as more of a job. Because for, for most of my life, I sang in churches. I was paid by churches to sing religious music. And you know, I got paid to go. So I, what moves me about sacred music is not always textual, it's mostly musical.

But, again, the, the idea and the praising of God has had such, actually, this is most apparent in music. The idea and the praise of God has heavily influenced music, you know, even as early as the eleventh century, the tenth century, when the, the very beginnings of modern singing started as Gregorian chants as praise to God. And for the
longest time that's all it was until about the fourteenth century when you know, a few sacred things crept in.

But if, if you really look at history, secular music didn't really come into its own until about the sixteen or seventeen hundreds. You know, several hundred years after, you know, sacred music kind of took a foothold. And, I, I personally prefer sacred music to secular music. I .... Sacred music is usually praising God, asking God for forgiveness, or, you know passages from the Bible. And the, the composer writes music to fit the text and to try to portray to the audience how this makes the composer feel. And I, as a musician, need to embody that feeling to accurately portray to an audience.

Attending religious services seems to play some part in how Garrett sees himself in relationship to religion.

**Mission trips.** Megan and Miranda continued to participate in mission trips through their home churches after going to college. They described these experiences as influential in their spiritual development.

I guess my draw to them is definitely like cultures. Like, I love experiencing different cultures. I love getting to know why people do different things. And so, I like doing that. Uh, I really like serving, too. And so a mission trip is like the perfects.. especially like the global ones is like the best opportunity to go. And you get to experience the culture. But, then, you also get to know the people, like, you get to serve them. So, to me, that's like the jackpot. It's like, "yeah!" Mission trips have been part of my life since, I would say, going into my freshman year. So, I've gone on at least one every summer since then. So, I think just the fact that I keep going on them, it kind of just like, once you go on one, it just brings you in more. I just, I just can't not go on one, if that make sense. Like, I don't
know, this summer would have been my first year not to go. So, I was like, panicking, I have to do something. Then, I found this mission trip I signed up for. And everything just kind of fell into place for it. So, to me, it's just a great opportunity to get to know like people, too, within your church. Or within the organization that you are going with. Uh, it's a great networking skill, it's a great time to just like fellowship with other people who kind of have the same mindset as you do. So, that's one reason I enjoy it.

I asked Megan to describe what she did on these mission trips. She told me about one trip to El Salvador. Most of the children she interacted with on the trip, she said, were Catholic.

I love working with kids, I love, um, getting to know, getting to kind of minister to them through that. And it also ministers to the family, too. Because, if their kids are fine and stuff in an environment, then the parents are more relaxed and can enjoy the morning. And so, I love doing that. On mission trips, though, we went to a lot of different schools, like in the middle of absolute nowhere. I mean like, the kids would come in with like dirty feet, like no shoes. Torn up clothes. I mean, it's heartbreaking, but it kind of makes you want to go back and keep, you know, hugging on them, even though they are like, dirty. [laughter] And, so by the end of the day, you're like, you're covered in dirt just like the kids. And it's like, it's a humbling experience I guess. So, I don't know, but, what we did there, or I guess what I'm kind of referring to is El Salvador. Which right now, is a very dangerous country. There's a lot of stuff that has happened since I came back from my second trip that is just insane. Uh, but while we were there, we did like mini-VBSs. It's like a program, like an hour and a half where we played games, did dances, did a skit, everything. Pretty much just loved on the kids. Cuz most of them don't have that at home. Most of Miranda’s trips were service-oriented in the United States.
In the summers, I was still going on the youth group mission trips as an adult leader. So, I thought that was..., that definitely going on those mission trips every year was a good thing for me. It kind of kept me grounded in my faith, even though I wasn't for a lot of the rest of the year just because I was at college.

Haley also still goes on mission trips regularly. These three participants recalled the mission trips they went on fondly. They described relationships they formed on the trips, especially with others in their groups, as important part of their religious experience. Especially for Megan, being one who does mission trips seemed to be an integral part of her religious identity.

3. Reconciliation of Evangelical Faith with New Understandings

Participants identified multiple themes related to the processes of reconciling the evangelical faith of their high school with new understandings about the world. Their current beliefs, doubts, and specific areas their current views conflict with those in their Christian school emerged as themes.

3.1 Beliefs. An important part of how participants understand their religious identity rests in what they believe about Christianity. I asked all of the participants to describe their current religious beliefs. Some of the participants seemed to struggle in their response. Most related elements of traditional Christian doctrine with acknowledgement that they felt unsure on some points. For instance, when I asked Miranda what it meant to be a Christian, she responded with uneasy laughter.

I guess, in like simplest form, it means that you believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and that he died on the cross for us, for our sins, and that [laughter] sorry, that if you accept him as your savior, then, you will have eternal life [unsure] and go to Heaven? [hands out, in questioning pose] [laughter]
I followed up by asking what it meant to “accept him”?

Um, really, personally to me, it just means you believe, you believe in God and in Jesus and the things that he did. And that really you've accepted him into your heart. And are, I guess, making, I guess really having a relationship with God or with Jesus or however you want to say that. Because, you know. It's all the same? I don't know, this is hard! But basically that you have a relationship with Jesus.

Jenna also expressed being a Christian in terms of a “relationship.” She talked about what she thought was essential for a person to go to Heaven.

I think obviously, first, having faith in you know, God personally first. You know, believing in him and having that relationship with him, you know, doing what you have to do to achieve salvation. You know, confessing your sins, and you know believing in him and the cross and the things that have to happen first. After that, I think it's just you know, a daily, conscious effort to you know, live like him and glorify him in everything that you do. It's been difficult to not, to not, follow the practices I guess you could say of being a Christian, because I haven't done the best job about that, being in college and being away from my parents, and things like that. You know like going to church, and reading your Bible and things like that that I haven't ... the practices. And so, most of the time in my life, I really try to make a conscious effort you know, to really just be the best person I can be and to glorify God, and give him glory when great things happen to me and you know, just have this attitude where like people like "she's different, something about her is different."

Luke expressed his thoughts on the requirements for one going to Heaven succinctly, in terms of belief.
I guess just having the belief that there is one true God who created all of this. There's a creator and that Jesus Christ died for our sins on the cross. That he came down here to take, you know, that, so we wouldn't have to.

When I asked Haley what she thought the most important parts of Christian doctrine were, she responded, “Um, well the fact that Jesus died on the cross, that's hella important.” With some prompting, she added a bit more.

Jesus knew that like, the mistakes we were going to make and like, he died. It's basically like what Christianity is but like, you know, he died for our forgiveness of sins, and like, he knew sin that way, like even before we did it. And that like means a lot to me because like, there are so many times where I've messed up and it's like, "Shoot, God's not gonna forgive me." But like, he's already forgiven you. And that's major.

Blake, who described himself as being interested in intellectual arguments for God’s existence, offered an explanation for why he was a Christian.

So the reasons I believe in God is that I look around at the universe around me and it is uh complex and intricate. And not just complex but also ordered. I believe physics work here and that it works everywhere in the universe. It's a conclusion that seems natural that it's almost, you're not gonna even think about it. But in a way this is remarkable that everything is ordered. Everything, everywhere works the same. And not everything has simple explanations. That's the whole basis for science. When we come across a phenomenon, science is all about trying to derive simple explanations for how these things work that are elegant and that explain it everywhere across the entire universe. Um it's possible that this is just how the universe just happens to work but generally what we see is that systems that are functional and that are that ordered seem to come from
creative things. Um that would just be one of the reasons that I think maybe something like God exists.

There's a couple others that also have to do with, with order and the universe. Um the reason I find Christianity to be uh promising as a religion, because of course just believing in God doesn't get you just Christianity. The idea that, the idea of some deity being out there sounds promising but so what? so what the idea that there's some deity that sounds promising. But I look at the scriptures though I find something that is of beautiful and and largely very correct. It's generally very consistent amongst itself. All things considered. And, uh, in comparison to the other world views that I know of, it seems to most adequately fulfill some of those philosophical arguments. Whilst still giving a a adequate and full explanation as a religion. Um that's why Christianity in particular sounds promising.

The participants’ discussions of their religious belief offer insight into how they view their religious identity.

3.2 Doubt. For many of the participants, understanding faith seems to be influenced by doubt. Blake’s response, while he obviously has thought a lot about his reasons for belief, also suggest an uneasiness with his faith. Later on, he joked, “I’ve fallen a bit, but it's been a very controlled fall! [laughter]” He seems to thought about the reasonability of his faith quite a bit, but doubt seems to have become an important part of his relationship with faith.

Well, I remember being personally very convinced and convicted in my faith throughout high school. I never really had serious doubts. I would do my best to question it and have intellectual discussions with myself about it, and try to convince myself. But I never really considered that the answer to "is the Christian God real?" would ever be no.
When you're so in the Christian world, it's the kind of atheist world starts seeming more and more foreign. It's hard for it not to just seem like this impossibly alien thing that you can't even wrap your head around. Um, and I think that in some ways was a disadvantage. 'Cause I think not entirely consciously, I had kind of built in this assumption that like, there was just no way that it made sense. That my viewpoint was the one that really made sense. And a lot of college was realizing that that's obviously ridiculous. [laughter] Not every other person besides you is stupid. They probably have pretty good reasons for why they believe what they believe. Um, and I would certainly say I'm a more cynical and doubtful Christian than I was before. I certainly much less confident in my faith than I once was, even if I am still very much a Christian ultimately, that is still how I would consider myself.

Later, Blake considered how people important to him in high school would feel to hear about his doubts. He seems to suggest that he misses the time in his life when faith was more clear to him. I think people would be a bit worried and unhappy to hear some things that I've said to you. You know when I say that I feel like there's a, a pretty decent chance Christianity is wrong. I'm sure that's something that would make my parents and many in my church uncomfortable even if they know ultimately I am Christian and still think that's the best chance. I think many Christians hearing someone say like, yeah you know I think this is like our best bet maybe. It's like not the bode of confidence most people would like to hear, which is understandable. And I do think, um, there is that sense in which part of what proves Christianity to you is that sort of personal experience you feel with God. And part of it you can try to explain away as as you're just kind of making up, it all up in your head. But it reaches a point where it's such a powerful point in your life that it gets
harder and harder to explain away. Um an I would love to try to reinvigorate that part of my life and that would definitely be something that would make me much more confident in my faith.

The theme of doubt reappeared in Megan’s description of how individuals went to Heaven or Hell. She slowed down as she spoke during this part of the interview, and gave me the impression she might be expressing the doubts aloud for the first time.

Pretty much, like when you get saved, there's a thing called the Book of Life. And it sounds completely, to me it sounds really weird. It sounds fictional and very like Narnia-esque kind of thing. But, your name gets pretty much written down, and you know, when you die, then, I don't know. It sounds so weird. So like, I don't know, it's hard to explain it to people, cuz it's like, yeah, you know, it's all like fair dust and everything. But, it's not. It's, you know, you, you go to Heaven based on, you know, if your name is written in there. If you do have a relationship with God. There have been people that have gotten saved on their death bed. And like, as soon as the got saved, they died. And, so, I believe that they did go to Heaven. So, I don't believe, I don't want to say it's all based on that. But, I do think you should have, you know, a good relationship. But, you can get saved on your death bed and die a minute later and be fine. Um, but if you don't, don't do that, and you know you don't reject everything bad in your past, then, and you don't accept him into your life and everything, then, there's Hell. Which sounds terrible, um, it sounds scary and it's not fun. It's like, you're going to be tormented forever.

Garrett’s doubt in the factual veracity of the Christian narrative does not seem to keep him from finding value in Christianity. Over and over, he expressed appreciation from Christian doctrine, even though he could not bring himself to believe in all of the details.
Probably, in its simplest way, I follow a Christian standard of living without the faith. I consider myself a man of principle. I consider myself a man of ethics. You know, I have a code of honor that I follow or try to as much as I can. And I, I am very fiercely driven by my ethics and my morals and my own damned pride, shhh, but I, in, in that way, I see religion influencing my mindset. My way of living is very in line with, you know, Christian doctrine. Love thy neighbor as thyself, you know, go the extra mile, you know, most of Christ's teachings. And, in fact, I even, I actually quite often, will reference, you know, parables by Jesus in context because they very much relate to life. And it, it's very interesting because not everyone knows the parables, and I'm kinda going, oh, so I kind of have to explain this in way that, you know, someone who didn't grow up, you know, in a choir or went to a sacred school, would understand.

Um, in terms of religion as a worldview ... Excuse me. I, being steeped in religion by [school name], and by spending most of my life in a church via you know either chapel that [school name] had every Monday or singing in churches or performing services or masses, I, I have a fairly deep understanding of Christianity from ... Both from an objective and a little bit from a subjective point of view. I, I have a very deep respect for the teachings of Christianity and if I weren't so confined by my need to have solid answers and evidence, that I probably would also profess a Christian faith.

And this, this is something that I've been trying to do for a while. I simply can't get over the, I need evidence. I need proof. It's the scientist in me. I, I can't settle for anything that says you need to take this on faith.
Luke also described doubting whether God existed, but eventually becoming more sure in his beliefs. Just as participants’ beliefs seem to be an important part of their religious identities, their doubts also seem to play a role in how they view themselves.

3.3 Conflicting world views. Most of the study’s participants discussed conflict between traditional Evangelical beliefs and new positions taken, or at least considered, while in college. Sexuality came up often—participants said their schools taught that it was sinful to be non-cisgender or non-heterosexual. Many of the participants, especially those who made friends or acquaintances with LGBTQ people in college, struggled with such an understanding. Some outrightly rejected it. A couple of participants rejected Young Earth Creationism (YEC) while at college. Almost all of the participants expressed anti-abortion views, however, that they maintained after high school. Participants also mentioned a few other political issues as being important to them now, such as social justice, the role of Christianity in politics, legalization of drugs, and immigration.

Sexuality. All of the participants talked about rights for LGBTQ people when thinking about ways what they learned in their Christian high school conflicts with views in broader society. Many said that they now support marriage equality and various equal rights protections. However, most also used words like “sin” when talking about LGBTQ people. The participants who have thought the most about their beliefs described becoming friends with LGBTQ people who challenged their pre-conceptions. Blake described how having gay apartment mates was the catalyst for examining what he believed.

Um, oh, I was definitely challenged on the homosexuality issue. That definitely was super tough… In my fourth year of college, I was apartment mates with three people, and two of them were gay. So, that was like, I was really good friends with these people, and
you know... That was something I've been building up over college anyway. That was something I still feel very dissatisfied intellectually with where I stand on, on homosexuality, and I increasingly... I basically just reached this point where I could no longer keep telling myself that it was wrong. It was just too, when you're just around that all of the time. I still, like in the back of my head, have this kind of asterisk next to it. Like, could still be wrong, could still end up in Heaven and Jesus is like, "No, homosexuality is bad." And I'd be like, all right, I guess I never adequately proved why, but it certainly feels like it's okay when you are around people who are having loving relationships and just seem in every other way totally normal. Um, and do it in an entirely normal way, that heterosexual relationships happen. Um, it just became really difficult to resolve in my head. And yet, I still feel, like, the the scripturally, I've read plenty of things about like scriptural justifications for why homosexuality is okay. And I've never found them entirely satisfying. I've found them like just barely satisfying enough that I can, like keep being Christian and it's all right. But, it's definitely like one of the biggest, most salient, like I really don't get this piece of my religion. [laughter] But, it's just one piece and there's a lot of other pieces that I do understand, so I'm not going to abandon it or anything. Over just one issue. Um, yeah, that was a big one. Um, not too many other issues that I've had that giant of a shift.

Megan also described struggling with biblical condemnation of LGBTQ people. She concluded with her opposition of marriage equality.

I have friends that are gay. So, it's like, I'm “aww”. Because I'm friends with them. But at the same time, it's like, you know, based on what the Bible says, it's not correct. Marriage is supposed to be between a man and a woman. And so, it's like, just like this fine line for
me. It's like, you know, they know where I stand on it. And, we're still friends after all of that. So, I mean, I would love to be like, yeah, I support it! Just go for it! But at the same time, it's like, I don't. And, you know I've tried trying to see both sides of it. But at the same time, it's like, I can't. I mean, I see both sides, but I like to know the whole picture. But, I fall more on the marriage is between a man and a woman.

Garrett said he thought Christians who oppose marriage equality were not being consistent in how they interpret the Bible. He founded his political support for marriage equality in America’s founding documents.

The, the people who are against gay marriage, you know, cite the Bible, you know, innumerable times. The, the issue is that is all Testament law. And these people are New Testament practicing Christians. They learn and they understand the Old Testament, but they don't practice Old Testament law. It, it was the only Old Testament law that they wanted to continue practicing.

I ... From, from a political standpoint, it is, it is a very good idea, and I'm all for it because, you know, everyone has the right to be happy. It's laid down in one of the U. S. historical documents. I can't remember which one. I think it's the Declaration of Independence, but every man has the right to the pursuit of happiness. And if marrying someone of the same sex makes you happy, go for it. I mean, there, there really is no harm to it.

Jenna expressed the the strongest opposition to marriage equality of all participants.

And then, legalizing of same sex marriage, I mean, I don't like it. I mean, we have freedom, and people can be who they want, be with who they want to be with, and you know, so, I don't really. I guess I really wouldn't say, I don't mind if it's legalized because
you know, you can't stop it. You know, people have freedom, just like I have freedom to go outside the door in here, and start preaching about something, you know, and start, you know offering prayer to people. I'm allowed to do that because I have freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

And so, you know, yes, I understand it's like a Constitutional right, but it's just a hard thing for me to deal with because I'm just so... I don't have a good I don't have a good knowledge of that. I don't really understand it very well, and so that one's hard for me. You know, I just don't agree with it. It's a hard thing to see in public when I see it, or just to kind of grasp that idea.

Just like with transgenders and those things like that. Like those things I just have a hard time getting, and so. I really wouldn't even say I don't even know my political stance on it because, you know, it's fair to say that people have the freedom to be with who they want to be, and say what they want to say and do what they want to do. But, it's just hard for me as a person when I see those kinds of things, so realistically, selfishly, I would like for it not to be legalized because that's just something that I don't like to see. But, just because it's not legalized doesn't mean I'm going to not see it. You know. So, that one's a hard one for me, but I do strongly believe in obviously, that same sex marriage is wrong and something that, you know, we shouldn't do, because that's not the way we were created. What we were created to do.

I asked her if she felt there was something morally wrong with LGBTQ people.

Right. Morally incorrect, you know. Because God created man and a woman, he created the woman from the man, and you know. He created the two of you to be together, you know, so. That's what I would say on that one. Politically I don't know. That's a hard one.
But, morally, I know my stance morally on same sex marriage, I guess that's the better way to put it.

Miranda said the way she thinks about LGBTQ people has completely changed since she left her Christian high school.

I think last time I was talking about homosexuality and definitely we were kind of pushed [by her evangelical Christian school] towards being prejudiced to like the homosexual and queer community, for sure. And, I think I said before, that was something that I feel really guilty about now that I look back and realize it. And my beliefs about that have just completely done a 180.

She expressed frustration that LGBTQ people, along with other groups that experience discrimination, do not have more equal rights.

I feel like there's still a lot of discrimination against women in our country. Um, and that's frustrating. Extremely frustrating to see that this is still happening in 2016. Um, so that's pretty important. Again, just like LGBT people, you know, having rights like all people are supposed to have in our country. And not only having rights, but being at least accepted enough that people aren't so violent towards them. And also, leading from that, there's still racism issues, even though it's 2016. Um, you hear about all of the police violence that you know, seems to be very much directed towards black people. And just the difference between how they treat Black people and White people. I think is something that's a shame that we're still struggling with and need to, something needs to be changed there.

Science. Some of what was taught in the science classes Haley took her first year contradicted the Young Earth Creationism (YEC) she learned in high school.
When I took biology, obviously it was very like, evolution and Darwin and I was like, "Nah fam, that's not true but okay. I'll just like go to this class," and um, well that's kinda obvious.

I asked her if anything in her classes made her question what she was taught.

Um no I didn't, it didn't change my mind. I think like [former science teacher] prepared us a lot for that. She said to us that you know, "This is what else is out there but this is what we believe," and so like it wasn't anything that I hadn't heard before coming from public, a public middle school. Um, but ... Okay but um it um it was kind of challenging 'cause I had people in my class who were very like argumentative that it was the way and that was it, and so um, I usually just kind of was like, "Okay we'll agree to disagree because, I don't know like what you want me to, I'm not gonna change your mind." I personally didn't have any problem hearing about it or anything.

She said her beliefs about climate change have departed what she learned in her high school science classes.

Global warming is like huge issue. And a lot of it is coming from cows and they are actually the sole biggest cause of global warming because of their emissions, like CO2 or whatever it comes from. And um, then like it takes like a ton of water to get a single hamburger with the amount that you have to feed the cow and like, do the, water the cow, whatever you call it. Hydrate the cow. And then like, the amount of food that we use to like, feed cows could be used to feed starving people. Like with the amount of grain and stuff. So that's really frustrating and um, it's something that I've just started like that I've just started kind of looking at and like it sucks for like ... The rising sea level like sucks
for the Maldives and shit, because they are gonna go underwater and it's gonna be like, "Oh, dang it." But um, yeah I think that's important.

Blake appreciated that he learned some about biological evolution in high school and now accepts it as fact.

Uh let's see here. Uh I mean there's sort of basic like I took a class in in biology that you know obviously we were learning about evolution. But thankfully [high school name] did teach a little about evolution. It wasn't just like, nope evolution's not true so don't worry about it (laugh). Like, it was taught in the context like you don't have to believe this, in fact you probably shouldn't believe this, but we still learned a bit. Which I am very thankful for because it is true.

Along with Blake, Garret expressed confidence in biological evolution as scientific fact. For Jenna, however, YEC beliefs were an important component of faith. She described attempts to teach evolution instead of YEC in public schools as a violation of basic American freedoms.

**Abortion rights.** The five participants who talked about abortion as an important issue expressed predominantly anti-abortion beliefs. Garret called himself “pro-choice,” but described reservations. Luke’s beliefs allowed for exceptions in some situations, but the other seemed to express support of total bans on abortion. Megan’s stance stems from when she believes life begins.

When it comes to abortion, I do believe life begins at conception. And so, I believe like every life matters. And so, that's more why I believe like in pro-life. Um, yeah.

Luke’s view was predominantly anti-abortion, but he was okay with exceptions in extenuating circumstances.
I think there are like certain cases where a woman, like an abortion would be acceptable and I think there's certain cases where, no, like, if you're just not being responsible, then, I think that's you know, deal with it. Like, I don't care what you have going on in life, knowing there's cases where an infant wouldn't even carry through, you know, not healthy or beneficial for the woman's health, or in cases of rape. People always have that argument. I don't feel like you would have to force someone to go through with that. But, they would still have to continue to live the life knowing what happened. And people have that regret, that guilt. And I feel people should be more aware that they would feel that. That's a really tricky field, because, if you just, you know, being lazy, and not using protection, or whatever, then yeah, if you got pregnant, you got pregnant. That's your own fault right there.

Blake described his political philosophy as tending toward anarchist. He seems somewhat unsure about how he viewed the government’s role in enforcing regulation, but he also offered support for abortion bans.

Abortion is just fundamentally a really hard ethical question. Because, your, it's no longer question of just one person's personal liberty, it's a question of two, or maybe one. Um so in that case um I'm still actually no. I'm probably technically kinda no and I don't even know where I stand on abortion. It's super hard. In the sense that if I was willing to accept almost any amount of government then I would also accept that it could, it could make abortion illegal. Um because I think if there's anything that the government should be allowed to do, it should be allowed to protect it's citizens. Like the most basic government I can think of is one that's pretty much police and military and just about nothing else. And that's, that's like the the basic kernel of what government is.
Garret offered some qualified support of a woman’s right to choose.

Well, I'm sure a lot of them, you know, don't want to abort a fetus. But, under extreme circumstances, they may be presented with that choice, and the choice is theirs to make. So, I, I would call myself pro-choice, but under extreme thought. Like I, I wouldn't just go out and say, "Oh, I'm pregnant. I'm gonna go get an abortion. I've made that choice." I think it needs to be a very seriously thought out choice. You know, everything in moderation. It needs to be moderated.

Jenna expressed her belief that abortion is always morally wrong.

Um, obviously, I am pro-life on abortion, and I don't believe that abortion is morally correct or just something that should really be an option, obviously, and abortion is a difficult topic because a lot of people say it's situational, you know, what if they're raped, or what if the baby is sick and going to die anyway? You know, I can't answer for those questions, because that's one of the things like well, you don't really know until you're put in that situation. You know, then you know, then you ask God for wisdom and things like that, and what he thinks you should do. But, this idea of I'm 16 and pregnant, and I was being dumb, and I didn't use protection, so I am just going to kill this baby.

Those kinds of things I don't agree with, I never will, and so I don't really, I think that abortion is just is very wrong. Most political people are figures that believe in that. I don't, I don't necessarily support, not saying one or their views is going to change who I vote for or how I look at them. But, it's a really strong one, because I just don't think that's correct, and that's not, you know. You shouldn't be able to put the power of killing someone in your own hands, you know? God doesn't mess up, God doesn't allow you to get pregnant if it's not, not really in your benefit, but you know, in his plan for you and in
learning and in lesson, but for your life is going to shape you into who you are. You know, so I don't really think that's something that we should be able to intervene, and control.

For the participants who talked about abortion rights, most expressed agreement with traditional Evangelical beliefs. Only one participant, Jenna, expressed her views with explicitly religious language, however.

**Other political issues.** A plethora of other issues came up as participants conveyed the political matters they found important. Broad categories that were represented included issues related to social justice, the role of Christianity in politics, legalization of drugs, and immigration. Many of Haley’s stances, she said, were developed in classes on social justice in her first-year college courses.

There are, like social justice issues are really important to me. Um, like what's going on in Flint and the um, like the um, injustices that urban schools face and how um, they're kind of being re-segregated, but politically. And um, I think the persistence of racism in our society is something that can't really be denied. Like the structural racism that we have. Um so it's, I don't know that much about it but it's something that I am interested in and something I've taken classes on and um, I went to like a week-long retreat that we kinda talked about that too. And um, it's something that, I think is important to address, just that this exists. We need to ... Like I take a whole class on basically all of these injustices and like we just talk about the same thing every week so that's frustrating but that's where I'm interested in. Politically that's what matters to me.

Miranda also talked about addressing inequality as an issue important to her.
I feel like there's still a lot of discrimination against women in our country. Um, and that's frustrating. Extremely frustrating to see that this is still happening in 2016. Um, you hear about all of the police violence that you know, seems to be very much directed towards black people. And just the difference between how they treat black people and white people. I think is something that's a shame that we're still struggling with and need to, something needs to be changed there.

As Jenna talked about the political issues that are consequential to her, it seemed more important than for most other participants that government actively promote Christianity. I asked her if she felt it was important that the American president be an Evangelical.

I think that's important you know. because obviously God is the leader of the world and of us, and of the people and you know, he's God over everything he's the ruler, but you know. If someone's going to be anointed to be the president of the United States, he needs to have that focus, or her, you know, they need to try to put the focus on God, and you know. Not realize that they have the power themselves, because it's not them that you know, has the power. It was God that gave them the power to be the president and to make these decisions. And so, I think that's very important because it's time now and it's just a mess that the world is in, and just all the terrible things that constantly happen all the time, you know.

I think it's important for someone to pull the focus back on God, because I feel like we've turned our backs on God, and what he does for us, and how important he is, and so that's caused you know, the world and the United States and you know the world, just to be the way it is right now. So, I think it's important that the candidate has an understanding of that, and wants to get back to that, because that's where it starts. If the president is for it,
he can work his hardest to make that happen. But if he's not, most likely, we're just going to continue to turn our backs away from God, so I would say that's very, very important to me.

I followed up by asking Jenna to talk about how she felt Americans had turned their “backs away from God.”

Um. Gosh. (pause) Mmmm. Well, obviously like, people want to take "In God We Trust" off dollar bills, and not being able to say the Pledge of Allegiance and prayer in school, which obviously has been gone for a while. But, just those things over time, throughout history that have happened, those are big things and those are rights. And so I think the biggest thing in how I think we've turned our back on God is that we've allowed atheists or Muslims or whatever kinds of religions people run the way you know, politics works, or the the way like they can do certain things. They can, they can talk in public, or they can state their opinions and do these certain things and have these rights, but when it comes to a Christian doing that, somehow that offends somebody and it's not okay. You know, so in that sense we haven't been fair. You know? It's like we can't do these Christian things, but these certain people and atheists can go do these things, and study these things, or we can learn about evolution in school, and we can learn about all of these things, but we aren't allowed to talk about this, or we aren't.

So, it's basically, you're taking away, I feel like they've taken away your rights as an American. You know, freedom of religion and freedom of speech? But more taking that away from the Christians, than just Americans.

Megan also talked about religious freedom and talked about it in terms of being a historically “Christian nation.” However, she also talked about the difficulty she perceived of
maintaining religious freedom for Christians without infringing on the religious freedom of other.

Our country is founded on you know, "In God we trust". Like, it was a Christian nation when we founded it. And so, to me, that's still, like, it was founded as a Christian nation for a reason. However, it is a country that has freedom of like religion and speech and all of that. And so I think we should still hold to that. Because, I don't want my freedom taken away one day because I want to take away someone else's right off the bat.

Megan is also a gun enthusiast. She said, “For me, I support the second amendment, so, guns all the way! You know, I do support that. So that's kind of more a Republican mindset.”

Luke and Blake both brought up the legalization of drugs as being important. Luke said he does not use drugs, other than marijuana, but still feels all drugs should be legal.

I believe drugs should be legal. I don't feel like, even like Schedule I, I believe heroin and opium et cetera wouldn't have nearly as much... I feel like if all the drugs were legal instead of just like pharmaceuticals, people would have less dependencies. And its been working in other countries, more or less. They have had decreased rates of people using the stronger like substances that they thought would be having ODs off the charts, but they're not.

Blake said that he does not use any drugs at all, but as one who believes in very limited government, no drugs should be illegal.

I'm definitely a big fan of like people should be able to do what they want within reason. This gets really complicated on certain issues but for some it's not merely so far. So I'm in favor of legalizing marijuana, that was easy. In fact I'd be in favor of legalizing all drugs. Which is perhaps a little more radical, but that's totally what I'm down for. The
idea of government controlling your life in these ways is uh it's something that I just kind of find naturally morally repulsive.

The interviews were conducted not long after Donald Trump proposed building a wall to separate the United States and Mexico. That seemed to have influenced how Megan thought about immigration. She seemed to reflect thinking more about how a wall might affect her than others attempting to come to the US, however.

Um, I guess on immigration, for me, because I do love mission trips. I love working with people from other countries. I'm actually going to Mexico in May for a mission trip. So, for me that's important. I want to have that connection. I want to have that open door. And so I guess that's kind of why I'm more like, don't build a wall. Like that's just stupid. I can fly, I mean, yeah, I'll fly there. But, that's not safe necessarily for me. I'll drive there. And then, I think that's, I don't know, I think that's just kind of why I believe that. Like, you know, you know, like we're all important people. I mean, everyone is. Like, all around the world. So, I think it's kind of, it would be negative. I think it, they would get mad. Because I would get mad. If someone tried to wall me off, I'd be like, “Well, that's not nice!”

Luke discussed the opportunities available to US citizens as motivating his desire for legal immigration.

I feel like everyone should have equal opportunity to come here. We have certain benefits that you have as a citizen. I feel like everyone should have the right to, you know, try to come about that. But, if, I mean, if they are, you know, a, you know, if they didn't come through properly, then I feel like they should have access to certain, like medical benefits, emergencies, stuff like that. But, if they're not being beneficial to society, at some point,
there has to be a cut-off to where it's no longer taking care of you. Unless, you can't physically take care of yourself. Then, that's understandable, but, I feel like you should work and your work pays off a return and that's what you get.

**Conclusion**

Participants identified many different influencers on how they understand their identity. These include the hidden and formal curriculum and peers in their Evangelical Christian high schools. At college, interactions with people who were different than most in their Christian schools and decreased religiosity were important. Church and mission trips continued to be meaningful in the lives of a few participants, however. Reconciling the Evangelical faith of adolescence with new understandings of the world produced some conflict. Some participants discussed their belief in Christianity confidently, while others expressed varying levels of doubt. All seemed to have grappled with beliefs about social, scientific, and political issues. Most described new ways of thinking that diverged from traditional Evangelical ideas, especially about LGBTQ people, while holding strongly to other stances, such as anti-abortion convictions.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Evangelical Christian schools in the United States have broader aims than their public, nonsectarian, and even many other religiously affiliated schools. In addition to providing an education on par with other K-12 institutions, some also attempt to instill a religiously fundamentalist and politically conservative world view. The overlap of these objectives leads to teaching that is exclusivist and intolerant. As the participants of this study showed, students who attend Evangelical high schools and go on to attend nonsectarian colleges and universities process what they learn and their experiences in a myriad of ways. This chapter explores the significance of the findings, especially in the context of literature on meaning making, multiple dimensions of identity, and evangelical school curricula. Implications for parents, evangelical Christian schools, nonsectarian colleges and universities, and policy makers are discussed. Then, the chapter suggests some known limitations of the research and some possible areas for future research regarding the problem issues explored. It concludes with the author’s closing thoughts and a final exploration of his personal growth.

The Study

The purpose of the study was to examine how one group of students from Evangelical Christian schools understand their experiences after transitioning to nonsectarian higher educational environments. Its central research question was: What are the experiences of graduates of evangelical Christian schools attending a nonsectarian college or university constructing the religious dimension of their identity?

Chapter 4 explored the lived experiences of seven students who made the transition. The participants for the study were emerging adults attending nonsectarian colleges and universities who went to an Evangelical Christian high school for at least three years. They provided insights
both into what it was like to be a student at a Christian school and how they now make sense of what they learned there. Each participant’s experience was unique, but there were common themes that ran through their accounts. Along with their school’s formal and informal curricula, interactions with peers and church experiences were important parts of participants’ development.

No similar studies existed that specifically examined the experiences of Christian school graduates who go on to attend nonsectarian colleges and universities. This study sought to better understand how they make sense of the competing influences of each environment and begin to fill this gap in the literature.

Identity

All of the participants in the study described religion as being a salient aspect of their identity. That dimension alone, however, was insufficient to describe who they were. Their identities were far too complex to be described by one characteristic. The ways participants saw their religious intersecting with other dimensions, current experiences, and past experiences were all also important. This is in alignment with Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI).

Differences seemed to play an important role in the way participants constructed identity. For example, for Luke, identification as bisexual and as “a stoner” were salient. He felt othered by former peers in his Evangelical school because of those dimensions of his identity, and that seems to have made them more salient for him. Even while she was still in her Evangelical school setting, Haley identified as an LGBTQ ally. That set her apart from most of her peers and she took it on as an important part of who she was. Denominational affiliation was important for both Luke and Haley, who came to Evangelical schools from denominations many peers did not
accept as being Evangelical. These findings highlight one of Jones and McEwen’s (2000) key conclusions that there is a “relative salience of identity dimensions in relation to difference (p. 408)”.

Especially for the women who participated in the study, there was a “braiding of gender with other dimensions (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 408).” Megan, Jenna, and Haley recalled discrimination by faculty and peers at their Evangelical schools specifically because of their gender. Gender roles established by their schools affected how they were allowed to dress and what leadership roles were available.

Jones and McEwen (2000) described the importance of race in MMDI. However, it did not appear to be especially significant for any of the participants. All of the participants in the study were white. Participants were asked to describe themselves, apart from the introductory biographical part of the interview where they were asked about race explicitly. Only one participant, Luke, chose a racial description. Haley and Miranda spoke of racial equality as a political issue that were important. However, neither talked about any advantage they received. This relative silence on race suggests participants may not be cognizant of the privilege associated with whiteness (McIntosh, 1998).

**Meaning Making**

The findings of this study were also in alignment with Abes et al.’s (2007) reconceptualization of MMDI that highlights the role meaning-making in identity construction. Meaning making was central to Kegan’s (1980) constructive-developmental framework, which included orders of meaning making. Baxter Magolda (2004b) described the orders most common in college-aged students as formulaic, transitional, and foundational. All three orders were represented by the participants.
Jenna exhibited characteristics of formulaic, and beginnings of transitional, meaning making. When I asked her to describe who she was, she responded, “Obviously, a believer. You know. I'm a Christian. I don't know. I don't like using that word because people have such a view on a Christ follower, [but] a believer in Jesus would be my first one.” Being a Christian, first and foremost, seemed to be incredibly important to her. She later used descriptors of her identity that suggested a strong, internally defined sense of self. She described what she thought were her most important attributes: “Expressing love. Showing love constantly. Love and kindness would be things I would describe myself as. Someone with those strong qualities. Compassion, those are all kind of synonyms of each other. Hardworking, persevering person, hard work is very important.” The way in which others understood the label “Christian” mattered to Jenna, suggesting contextual influences had some influence in the way she saw herself. However, she also relied on stereotypes of non-Christians to define who she was not. She was not like the professors who believed in evolution, not like those who would remove “In God we Trust” from currency or take prayer out of schools. She seemed to identify strongly with Evangelicals and was distrustful of non-Evangelicals.

An important part of the transition from formulaic to foundational meaning making structures requires confronting stereotypes (S. R. Jones & Abes, 2004). Some participants in the study described intrapersonal conflict in their identity development, in particular the religious dimension of identity as they confronted stereotypes they held. For instance, Miranda exhibited deep remorse as she recalled her past views towards LGBTQ people. Blake described being surprised when he first thought about the possibility someone who was agnostic or atheist could live ethically. Especially Miranda, Blake, Haley, and Luke were careful to distance themselves, at least partially, from their Evangelical schools. This suggests they may be gaining new ability
to understand and control group allegiances that they once accepted passively, a significant feature of transition from formulaic to foundational meaning making.

According to Kegan (1982), experiences with Others makes it possible for one to progress in meaning making. The interactions make it possible to view new parts of their own life as object instead of subject. They can lead to empathy, a characteristic that is generally evidence of foundational meaning making. Participants described the interaction they had with non-Evangelicals at college as a catalyst for changing the way they thought about Evangelicalism’s tenet of exclusivity. Most hinted that salvation might be possible for non-Evangelicals. Some suggested non-Christians could go to Heaven, a blatant infringement on traditional Evangelical beliefs. Those experiences with people of different religions were important in developing more inclusive attitudes. Additionally, the participants who had the most interactions with LGBTQ people were also described the most accepting views. This reinforces the findings of Wolff et al. (2012). Experiences with people who were othered in participants’ Evangelical school led to more acceptance.

Constructing an adult identity requires a transition from relying on others to understand one’s self to using one’s own voice (Baxter Magolda, 1999). A few participants showed signs of such self-reflexivity. Blake described reflecting on his journey of faith.

It's frustrating that I feel like I'm very slowly etching away from Christianity and I'm like “Stop!” (chuckle) Um, you know, it it's a slow flow but it does, it does make me worried. I don't like that, um, It's kind of hard to imagine not being Christian. Which is part of something I've tried to solve a little bit.

Fowler (1981) put forward a framework for understanding the development of faith. In the model, crises of faith are necessary for transitioning to a faith that is more mature. The
experience of reflecting on how his faith was changing was worrying to Blake. However, both Abes et al.’s (2007) and Fowler’s (1981) models suggest the struggle is necessary for and evidence of maturing.

Evangelicalism values orthodoxy—having correct beliefs—in all areas of life (Colson & Pearcey, 2004). To be an Evangelical is to believe correctly. As participants in this study encountered ideas that contradicted their understanding of the world, some seemed to be left questioning what kind of Christian they were—or if they were Christian at all. Responses were far from uniform. Most participants seemed to assimilate at least some new beliefs with their Evangelical faith. In certain instances, though, the individuals in the study retained deep Evangelical convictions. They seemed to be influenced by context, peers, family, and meaning-making capability.

**Evangelical Curricula and Pedagogy**

In an extensive review of textbooks commonly used in Evangelical Christian schools, Paterson (2003) concluded that many shared common characteristics. Religious and nonreligious elements were presented simultaneously, and politically persuasive arguments were interspersed in sections of material generally accepted as factual. Participants’ recollection of high school classes support Paterson’s (2003) findings. For example, Miranda and Haley remembered government and history classes where their teachers presented material with some strong biases towards Republican and Libertarian party platforms respectively. Blake described frustration with how biblical material or messages were “shoehorned” into lessons where it did not seem to fit. Additionally, Patterson (2003) found Evangelical textbooks frequently used descriptions to describe people and movements that implied political conservatives and Christians were acceptable while others were not. The participants in this study did not speak of such treatment
in textbooks. However, some did recall teachers speaking positively and negatively of political leaders based on their perceived conservatism or liberalism. Looking back, some participants noticed some of the same biases in their education that Paterson (2003) found existed in textbooks commonly used by Evangelical schools.

The descriptions of schooling experiences provided by participants included characteristics some theorists have linked with education that is oppressive. Luke’s described how teachers treated students who disagreed about young-Earth creationism.

If you had any other viewpoint, faculty would kind of laugh you off. If you had another viewpoint, they didn’t necessarily want to hear it, or if you did speak up, they would kind of laugh it off. And be like, "No, no, no, this is how it is." And other students, you would get more, negative feedback, necessarily, just based on your personal viewpoints. And constantly having something you believe just torn down and people throwing something in your face saying that it is wrong or why their view is right. You know will make you think eventually that maybe your viewpoint isn't right or question it.

The teacher’s methods in Luke’s account represent Freire’s (1970) banking system of education. The “teacher teaches and the students are taught (p. 73).”

Participants recalled their teachers conferring religious authority to their lessons, which increased the oppressiveness of their educational environments. When a teacher claims to be describing God’s position on a subject, to question their narrative is to commit spiritual rebellion. For teachers to link a student’s political, economic, or scientific understandings to the eternal fate of their soul is an abuse of the classroom. Such pedagogy has potential to propagate heterosexism and the demonization of non-Evangelicals.

Implications
This study has implications for parents evaluating school choice options for their children, teachers at Evangelical Christian schools, faculty and staff of nonsectarian universities, and policy makers. This section explores those implications and makes suggestions for each group based on the findings.

**Parents.** The decision to consider a private school education is undoubtedly complex and multi-faceted. This study has important implications for parents investigating schooling options for their children. Whatever goals parents may have, it is important to be aware that an education at an Evangelical Christian school may have repercussions that are not immediately apparent.

Parents should be aware that at least some Evangelical schools attempt to indoctrinate children with fundamentalist religious doctrine and conservative political views. Students are taught far more than traditional school subjects. Trickle-down economics, heterosexism, and Christian exceptionalism may be interspersed with history, math, and literature. While there may be parents seeking such an education experience for their children, surely some are unaware of the dogma that will be presented. Especially during such a critical time in the socialization of young people, exposure to religious fundamentalism may have far-reaching consequences. Parents should be prudent when investigating schooling options.

This study’s purpose was not to evaluate the quality of programs in participants’ high schools. However, it is notable that all seven participants expressed some negative feelings about different aspects of their education. Common complaints included that some classes were too easy and that schools did not provide adequate student guidance for college planning. One student reported insufficient counseling support for students in the midst of tragedy. Parents should be diligent in their research of academic programs and available student services if they consider Evangelical Christian schooling options.
Wagner (1997) reported finding support for “‘generic’ panconservative Christianity (p. 13)” in Christian schools. As was also the case for participants in this study, students from a wide range of conservative Evangelical denominations were included and accepted, even though doctrinal differences existed between denominations, in Evangelical schools. Parents who are Christians, but part of a denomination outside of traditional Evangelicalism, should be aware that children may feel pressure to change denominational affiliations. Two participants in the study came from denominations not widely accepted by their school. Luke’s family belongs to a small Pentecostal denomination and Haley’s is Catholic. Both began attending different churches than their family while in high school. Luke cited pressure from peers as being a strong motivator. This is one way Evangelical schooling may lead to significant struggle as students negotiate their identity.

**Evangelical Christian schools.** Kumashiro (2000), in an exposition on anti-oppressive education, lamented in conclusion:

I acknowledge that engaging in such efforts presupposes a commitment on the part of educators and researchers to subversive views of the purposes of education, of the roles and responsibilities of teachers, and of how we want students and society to change. I also acknowledge that, even with this commitment, the difficulties in implementing changes in our present educational system and in today's political climate are substantial. (p. 48)

The same challenges certainly apply to the implementation suggestions proposed for Evangelical schools. However, in eight years inside these religious schools, I have found educators sympathetic to the problem of practice presented here. My story is evidence that some teachers
are concerned with the oppressive curricula and pedagogy in some Christian schools. This study has implications for Evangelical Christian school teachers and faculty.

Teachers must stop presenting political views as religious, absolute truth. To present opinions about issues like the size of government or economic theory as endorsed by God is an unfair appeal to divine authority. It is oppressive and confusing to students. Additionally, teachers must not disparage others based on gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

Participants in this study recalled LGBTQ people being presented as sinful, destined to be tormented eternally, based exclusively on their gender identity or sexual orientation. Women in the study reported gender discrimination. The literature review in Chapter 2 showed that some Christian schools use textbooks that denigrate people of color, especially non-Christians. These practices reinforce hegemony, and teachers have a responsibility to stop them.

In addition to the cessation of oppressive practices, teachers should also begin more constructive ones. Since race has historically been one driver for enrollment in Evangelical schools (Wrinkle et al., 1999) and may even continue to be (Saporito, 2009), teachers should work to address white privilege in these schools. In their proposal for of a pedagogy for whites who may not recognize privilege, Anders et al. (2005) said, “We believe that it is our responsibility as whites through experience, narrative, and performance to interrogate the ways in which whiteness is constructed (p. 97)”. According to Kumashiro (2000), anti-oppressive education should be “critical of Privileging and Othering (p. 25)” if it hopes to bring about change in the lives of students and society. Evangelical school teachers are in a unique position to be part of such interrogation of whiteness towards anti-oppressive goals.
**Public educators.** Of course, many of the curricular issues present in Evangelical schools also affect public schools. State and local school boards have a long history of attempting to block teaching about biological evolution and include Creationism (Hickey, 2013). In the last decade in Texas, Evangelical Christians on the State Board of Education have lobbied to include strengths and weaknesses of biological evolution in science standards (Zimmerman & Loye, 2011). Many scientists and educators agree that such attempts are a thinly veiled tactic of young Earth creationists to introduce religious beliefs into science curricula (Zimmerman & Loye, 2011). According to Erekson (2012), some of the same State Board of Education members in Texas have successfully lobbied to prioritize conservative agendas in history standards. In 2009, new standards downplayed the relevance of slavery to the start of Civil War and did not mention Jim Crow laws at all. Textbooks written to address social studies standards portray Islam and Judaism negatively, while exaggerating Christian influence on the United States’ founding (Strauss, 2014). All teachers and administrators, even in public schools, need to be cognizant of attempts to introduce religious material to state-funded education.

**Nonsectarian colleges and universities.** For leaders in nonsectarian colleges and universities, implications of this study exist in the areas of student services, admissions, and academics. Higher educational institutions should be working to promote safe, inclusive environments where privileged students have ample opportunities to explore systemic oppression and their own stereotypes. The universities where graduates of Evangelical schools attend have a unique opportunity to promote tolerance other anti-oppressive aims.

One of the key findings of this study highlighted the salience of students’ interactions with individuals marginalized by their Evangelical schools. In particular, participants who had significant experiences with people of religions, sexualities, and gender identities their schools
presented as sinful expressed more tolerant and inclusive views. The accounts participants
provided of such interactions were most often extracurricular: outings with roommates,
spontaneous, late-night dorm conversations, and in social or arts clubs. Most happened without
faculty or staff interaction. Universities should keep working to ensure opportunities for
interactions between students of different backgrounds exist. This research was not privy to
accounts from the other individuals represented in participants’ narratives. Student affairs groups
should work to provide support for all students who have these interactions, but especially those
from traditionally marginalized groups.

Many participants recalled faculty at their Evangelical schools giving them a false sense of
anti-Christian sentiment they were likely to encounter at a public university. Megan recounted
how one teacher told her, "Ok, college is going to be hard. There are going to be professors that
are just going to hate you because you are a Christian." Along with other participants, she found
that university faculty were not antagonistic like she feared they might be. Positive outreach is
one way nonsectarian institutions could be instrumental in changing Evangelical school teachers’
perceptions. For example, by inviting teachers to take part in professional learning communities
with their faculty, universities could help teachers garner more positive views.

Policy makers. In this researcher’s home state of Texas, there is little oversight of non-
public schools. Rather than direct accreditation by the state’s educational agency, the Texas
Private School Accreditation Commission, or TEPSAC (“TEPSAC,” n.d.) oversees
accreditation. TEPSAC is a “confederation of associations whose primary purpose is to maintain
private school accreditation standards (para. 2).” Most of its commissioners are the state heads of
the accrediting agencies the commission recognizes in the state. Under Texas compulsory
attendance law, “a child may be exempt from attending public schools if he or she attends a
private or parochial school that teaches good citizenship (“TEPSAC FAQ,” 2014, para. 2).” However, some of the agencies accredit private schools that promote hegemony over good citizenship. Perhaps a more active role by policy makers and regulators is needed in the accreditation of these schools.

Policy makers should also use caution when evaluating charter schools and voucher programs for many of the same reasons. In Texas, Kopplin (2014) found that some charter schools were using character curriculum from Christian sources that had simply been scrubbed of Bible references. Textbooks also taught Creationism in science and that homosexuality was a ‘lifestyle’. In some states and localities, Evangelical schools are eligible to receive taxpayer money through voucher programs. To give these schools government funding is an inappropriate promotion of religion.

Personal changes led me to this research project and ultimately away from the evangelical school where I was employed. I could not remain at a school that publicly opposed values important to me. An employment change I felt necessary for living a more authentic life limits the influence I might have for change. However, there are still ways I can still work as a change agent. I hope that this research will lead to opportunities to talk with parents considering school choice options. Those not intentionally seeking a fundamentalist Christian education could benefit from hearing these students’ stories. Occasionally, former students contact me and want to talk. I will use these opportunities for conversations to support students in their journey understanding their experiences. There is also a need for a new wave of research on a continuously changing Evangelical school movement, and I would like to be a part.

This study shows the significance of the problem of practice presented in Chapter 1. The participants reported that their experiences in Evangelical Christian schools were instrumental in
shaping how they construct multiple dimensions of their identity. A more robust understanding of these experiences may help parents, faculty at Evangelical schools and nonsectarian universities, and policy makers support students.

**Limitations**

There are limitations of the extendibility of findings from this study. It only included seven participants, so it would be unreasonable to suggest their experiences could be representative of all Evangelical school students. Evangelical beliefs vary widely on a wide range of topics, as do Evangelical schools’ climate and curricula. Different colleges and universities would presumably result in different experiences, as well. While this study attempts to capture the essence of its participants’ experiences in their particular contexts, students from different K-12 schools or colleges likely have different ones.

Additionally, the demographic composition of the group of participants may lead to more limitations. All of the participants were white, so the study does not provide any insights into how the Evangelical Christian school experience might be different for students of color. Four of the students who participated were only in the first year of college. They were still in the beginning stages of a transition from an Evangelical environment to one that is more nonsectarian. As their time away from high school increases, their interpretations of their experiences may change. Even the older participants are still in various stages of emerging adulthood, and their understanding may vary with time.

**Areas for Future Research**

Continued research on the impact of Evangelical schooling on student development is needed. New populations of participants could increase understanding of the diversity of experience. For instance, how do students who maintain higher levels of religiosity or persevere
in traditional Evangelical beliefs understand their experiences differently? It could also be enlightening to include students from more schools in an effort to isolate individual school characteristics that are important. Perhaps including participants who are older and further removed from both Evangelical school and college contexts could also be beneficial for investigating how both influence identity development over time.

The findings of this study suggest that non-school influencers on identity also have an important impact on identity development. Most notably, peers and church seemed to be significant. The experiences participants had with new friends at college helped to positively shape their perceptions of people often viewed with negative stereotypes by Evangelicals. For three participants, going on mission trips was also impactful. Further research is needed to better understand how these influencers in conjunction with school context shape development.

Evangelical Christian schools have been explored in the literature, but this research attempted to document how students understand their experiences after some time away from their school contexts. For these students, constructing the religious dimension of their identities was an ongoing process that required significant energy. Their Evangelical K-12 schools and experiences in new university environments both influenced their beliefs and how they understand the religious dimension of their identity.

**Concluding Thoughts**

When a religious person asked Jesus which was the most important commandment in scripture, he responded that none were more important than loving God and loving one’s neighbor (Mark 12.29-31). From a very young age, these teachings have permeated the way I think about the world. For most of my life, I understood upholding the teachings and church interpretations of the Bible as central to the first commandment. Actions were important, but my
communities’ rubric for assessing other’s love for God was based largely on the rightness of
their belief. In practice, “rightness” was determined by the degree to which beliefs corresponded
to our own. In this paradigm, loving God required subscription to a variety of views that are
intolerant of Christians from other denominations, non-Christians, and LGBTQ people and their
allies. However, to question these beliefs, even to support the wrong political candidate, was to
call into question one’s love for God.

Eventually, the literal view of the Bible and its authority became less able to explain the
complexities of the world. On mission trips in college, I realized that many of the people whom I
was proselytizing did a much better job of loving other people than I did. They seemed to live
out their love for God more genuinely than me, too. Could God love me and hate them because I
believed correctly? What about my lesbian and gay friends who are professing Christians and
love sacrificially? These questions were very real for me, and I felt the same pangs of identity
crisis described by a few of this study’s participants. Rejecting elements of Evangelical
orthodoxy meant I loved God less—at least in the way I had always thought of what it meant to
love God.

The struggle of understanding my religious identity, of knowing what it means to love God
and other people well, has been a significant part of my adult life. When I began this doctoral
program, I believed many of the doctrines I denounce in this work. Until recently, the struggle
was internal while I maintained Evangelical affiliations. Last year, I was still teaching at
Evangelical school. A few years ago, my family and I still attended a fundamentalist church.
Only in this recent time frame have I began to consider and acknowledge my participation in
privilege based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. At this point in my own journey,
I especially feel shame for the way I thought, and even taught students, about LGBTQ people. It
saddens me to know that I share some responsibility for the problem of practice explored in this project.

Exploring the religious identity development of students led me to think a lot about my own. It has taken me a long time to progress from nagging doubts to a period of internal turmoil to a sense of comfort in religious contradictions. I view righteousness as much more complicated than interpreting Scripture correctly. I do not think less of the Bible now than I did as an Evangelical, though. There is incredible value in understanding how those before me thought about the transcendent parts of human experience and their place in the world. In the process of contemplating mine, I have come to the conclusion that I must sincerely love others to love God. For me, one important part of that is rejecting ideologies and interpretations of the Bible that denigrate people or promote tribalism over inclusivity and tolerance.

I realize my former Evangelical school colleagues may take offense that I would even consider taking on this project. They will probably find its characterizations of fundamentalist doctrine heretical. Even though this research is critical of Evangelical school teachers and administrators, I do not question their motives. I am personally convinced most genuinely believe they are loving God in the purest way they can—I did. I hope all readers will trust that this work comes out of my own attempt to live a self-examined life characterized by justice, kindness, and humility.
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